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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

A Thrilling New Mike Shayne Mystery

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by Brett Halliday

A Suspenseful Novelet

NIGHT WORK

by Carl Hoffman

plus short stories

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Crime Writers

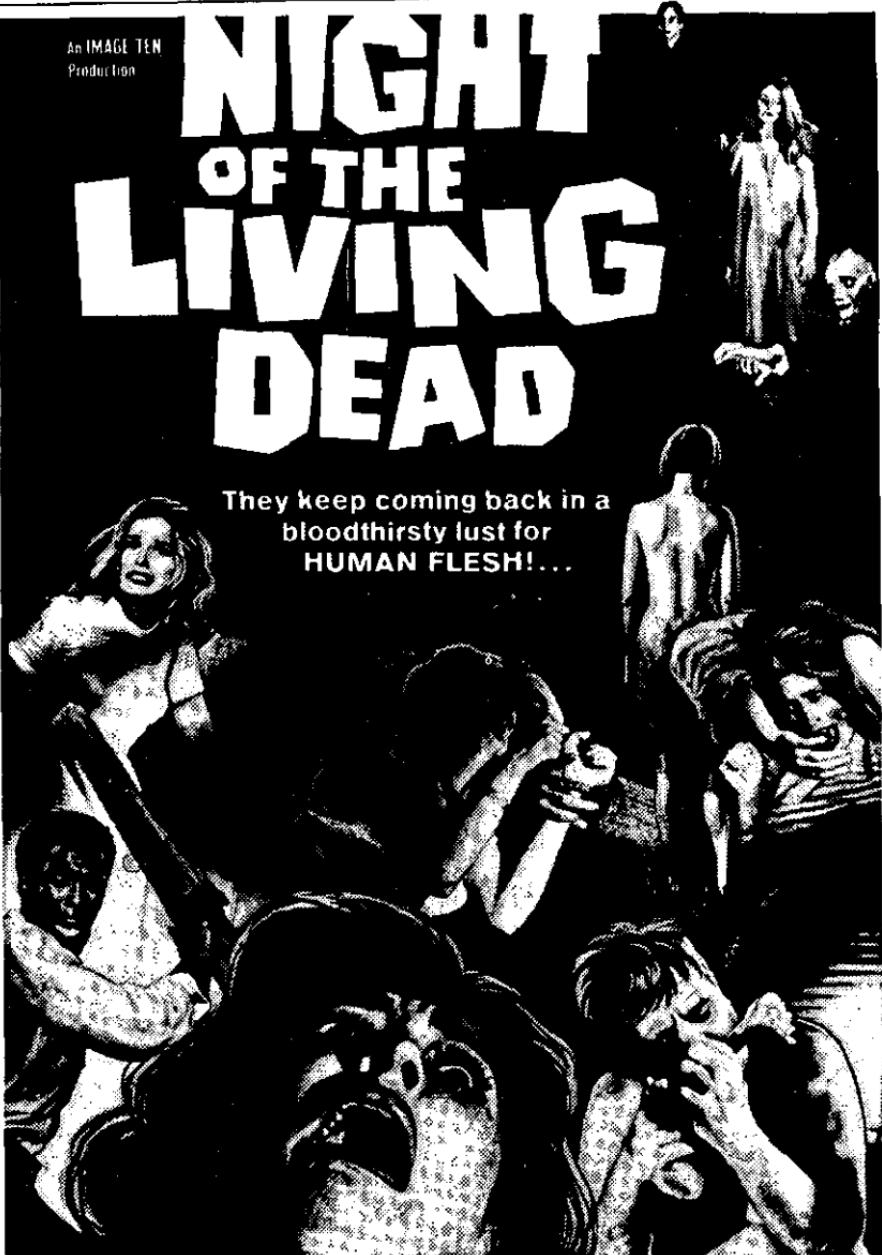


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They keep coming back in a
bloodthirsty lust for
HUMAN FLESH!...



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A Walter Reade Organization Presentation — Released by Continental



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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

SHARKS

by Brett Halliday

There are all kinds of sharks. The worst are two-legged, who walk on dry land, preying upon human frailties. Mike Shayne had met them before, and he was meeting them now. He didn't like what they were doing to people—or what they were trying to do to him! 4

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Shayne pushed open the bathroom door with the barrel of his Smith & Wesson. He had seen it many times before, but the filled bathtub overflowing with wine-colored water made him vomit. He held his head between his legs, not bothering to look any farther than the bone-white hand that emerged from the water like an obscene periscope.

Then he heard the sound behind him!

Sharks

by BRETT HALLIDAY

IT WASN'T THE SHARKS FOLLOWING THE TRAWLER THAT made the boy climb on top of the cabin. Less than a hundred yards off the aft, twin fins razored the choppy waves. The boy knew they were always there, waiting. Clinging to the mast his father had erected in case the rebuilt engine were finally to quit, he shaded his eyes and peered to the east. On the horizon he could just make out the towers of Miami Beach that told him they would be home within the hour for a breakfast of fish chowder. There, to the south, where the azure water mirrored the early-morning movement, the boy's eye had spotted something.

Quickly he scampered back down into the cabin. His father stood there half-asleep, one hand on the wheel and the other wrapped around a long bottle of wine.

"I toast our success," said the bearded man, taking a swig and wiping the excess on his sleeve.

"Where are the glasses, poppa?" said the boy.

"Who needs glasses. Great fishermen like us can drink from the bottle," said the father, offering the wine.

"I mean the spy glasses."

"The binoculars." He laughed deeply as the boat surged into a wave crossways, spraying them both with fine surf. "Why didn't you say so? Beneath my seat."

The boy did not say another thing, for when his father was drunk, he was happy and best left alone. Carefully the boy removed his glasses, and clutching them tightly, he climbed back atop the twenty-footer.

Even this close to shore, the sea was rough like a clumsy playmate. It was difficult for him to hold to the mast and train the glasses on the horizon. When he did, the sunlight splattered his face and blinded him. But the boy fought the sea as he had been doing since midnight.

"My God," he screamed and scampered back to the cabin.

His father was sitting when he arrived.

"Poppa, turn the boat to the south."

"There are no fewer waves in that direction, Peter."

"No, but there is something in the water."

"Who cares? We have found all in the water we need today."

Peter stared at the hold. Beneath the already stinking grouper and the red fish was what looked like a bale of hay wrapped in plastic. He wasn't sure what it was, but when his father had fished it out of the sea just a short while before, he had said, "We are rich."

"If you won't drink with me, go sleep," said the father.

"Poppa, I saw a man."

"A man."

"A man in the water. He was holding to something."

"Was he moving?"

"It was too far away. Come, we must help."

"Forget him. He is probably dead. Besides, the sharks will get to him before we can."

"Poppa, please."

"Oh, all right. You show me."

The boy climbed back to his perch and directed his father toward where he was certain he had seen the man. Now there was nothing. He looked again through the glasses. A white shirt bobbed up on a wave.

"To the left, poppa."

"Port, Peter. Port."

As they drew closer, Peter could see the figure was atop a log. He or somebody had attached him to it with a belt. He noticed something else.

Fins.

"Shark," he cried out.

"Take the wheel, Peter," said his father.

They switched places. The father appeared on deck with a small rifle. Spotting the slicing fin, he fired. Then again. He saw a swirl. Red leaked into the water to be quickly dispersed. He fired again.

The swirl became an eddy as one shark attacked the other. Slowly

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Peter brought the boat up beside the immersed figure. Wooden planks drifted around. His father, using a gaff, hooked the floating figure's belt and pulled.

While the trawler idled, Peter and his father reached over the side and pulled the body aboard. The bearded man put his ear to the chest, then felt the wrist. "He is dead."

Peter stared at the body. He had seen thousands of dead fish before, but in all his twelve years he had never seen a dead man. Sunlight glinted off the flesh. The boy bent over. There was something around the man's neck. He looked closely.

It was a wire attached to a box, sort of like a portable radio.

ALLEN HARLISON CURSED HIS LUCK AND STUBBED OUT his Gaulois. It was noon of the last day of the sales contest, high noon, and here he was; running neck and neck with Waters and his overdone English accent, desperate for a customer. And who was in the showroom? A beady-eyed kid carrying his lunchbox.

Harlison leaned forward on his desk and peered through the glass that separated his office from the showroom. On top of it the kid was black. That was sure to scare off a few customers, especially the old ladies.

Like a vulture the thin kid circled the pearl-white 380SL. Harlison began to laugh. He had seen similar kids staring at stereos. Then the kid actually kicked the tires. What did he think this was—some used car lot across the bay in Miami? Drumm Imports didn't sell cars—it offered vehicles, driving experiences, the opportunity to possess mechanical perfection.

Exasperated, Harlison glanced at his Rolex Oyster. The kid had been there almost ten minutes now. The bald-headed man mopped his brow with the monogrammed handkerchief Penny had given him. Penny. She of the loose, long, luscious hair. She of the long legs and loose morality. She whom he had promised the week-long trip to Vegas when he won this pitiful contest.

There was only one solution. Wasn't high noon time for showdowns? Straightening his club tie and putting on his double-breasted jacket, he strolled into the showroom. The kid was sitting behind the wheel of the Mercedes.

"Like it?" said Harlison with a gleam in his eye.

The kid nodded. "Say, bro, what's a ride like this buy for?"

Harlison winced as much at the damage to the language as that being done to the front seat. "About \$44,000, give or take a few pennies," he announced.

"Oh?" said the kid. "That be a lot of bread."

"When you consider what you are obtaining," said Harlison haughtily, "it is really quite cheap."

"You got a point, jack, and I do feature this ride."

Harlison's smirk rose up from the depths of twenty-two years of experience. "Very well, sir. Will that be a check or credit card?"

The kid got out of the car, picking up his lunch box from the passenger's seat. "Cash," he said, opening it up.

Harlison gasped and choked back the surprise. The inside of the black box was stuffed with thousand-dollar bills.

PENELOPE RETURNED TO THE FULL-LENGTH MIRROR ON the back of the bedroom door one more time. The gingham dress fit her perfectly. The collar scooped down slightly, and the hem hit just below the knees. The apron was white and full-length.

Demure was the word. Just what Phil liked, and he was due any second. She walked over to the west-facing, sliding glass doors and stepped out into the night. From the twelfth floor she could see all of Miami across the bay bathed in shadows. The sun gave a last wink before disappearing behind what she supposed was a tenement. In any case it was ugly, and she was glad it grew dimmer by the second. The breeze off the Atlantic was cool, and she wished she had worn a sweater.

She went back into the dining room and ceremoniously lit the five candles on the centerpiece with a single match. Then, moving back into the living room, she started up the incense burner. It began to give off a faint smell of peppermint that reminded her of the toothpaste at the orphanage where she had been alone until she had been adopted.

She checked her heart-shaped face in the mirror. Just lipstick—no eye shadow. Phil was really particular about that. "Don't want my baby girl looking like a flaming harlot," he had said more times than she could count. She brushed back an errant wisp of hair. Nothing out of place.

Penelope studied the desk. The mail on the left end was separated from the evening paper on the right by the telephone and micro-computer setup. The incense had stolen into the hallway, ready to greet him when he arrived home. The faint trace of the roast also crept in like a house pet. Phil loved lamb, mint jelly, and those little Idaho potatoes.

Everything was perfect. It had to be. This evening was special.

Penelope heard the ocean crash on the beach below. Music. It wasn't playing. She had forgotten. Nothing could go wrong. Carefully she selected an album, *The 101 Strings Play The Beatles*. "Dentist music,"

Phil called it, but with him, it was like "baby girl," a term of endearment.

Bzzz. Bzzz. The doorbell rang. Always twice.

Good old regular Phil.

She opened the door slowly. He was standing there in his tan suit, gray hair, and black briefcase. "I've missed you," she said, brushing her lips on the corner of his. "I just hate it when you leave me alone."

"Business is business," he said, setting the briefcase down under the desk and thumbing through her mail absentmindedly. "Terrific—no bills." He picked up the paper. "Anything happen in the Magic City while I was away?"

"The usual," Penelope answered, noting a story on the bottom of page one that an unidentified body had been found earlier that day in the ocean, the lovely ocean.

She crossed over to the bar and punched the blender. It whirred. She poured the icy drink in a tall glass and handed it to him.

"Delicious," he said just smelling the glass. "Did anyone ever tell you you're perfect?"

The smile came from her heart. The man always touched her even without making contact with her.

He reached into his coat pocket and handed her an envelope stuffed with money. "Can we skip dinner," he said. "I've got to get home early tonight. It's Karen's—no Katy's birthday."

"Sure," she said. Her heart skipped a beat. Phil was just so regular about everything. "It's the best rack of lamb I've ever seen, though."

"Don't pout. Just go get ready." He sat down in the huge white chair beneath the picture of St. Joan burning, and, holding his drink, he began to glance through the paper.

Penelope walked into the bedroom, which was bathed in lavender light. So Phil didn't want to play his special brand of house tonight. Any other time she would have been glad not to have to recreate a scene out of his midwestern childhood, but not tonight. Tonight she had promised—tonight she had been planning for. Soon she would be able to make the final payment on her debt.

"There's plenty more pina colada in the blender," she called as she sat down at her dressing table and began to twirl her hair into pony tails. And, hurry up and drink, she wanted to say. She wished it didn't have to be Phil, but none of her other customers were as regular, as predictable as Phil. He had never hit her; he had never even cursed. And other than the fact that he needed a prostitute every Monday, he was about as normal as any john she had ever seen. Every other one was into something really kinky, but Phil, he just wanted to pretend he

was getting back to the farm after a long trip to the city. He would ask about the cows, the corn fields, even the soy beans. In fact, the only thing kinky about Phil was that he had never asked for sex. Two hundred a night and they only talked like brother and sister.

Still, she had a debt to repay.

She started looking through her bureau drawers for the cheerleader sweater, the white one with the big A stitched on the front and the blue rings around the sleeves. Phil had given it to her.

A noise came from the living room, a sound as if Phil had staggered into some furniture.

Good old reliable had probably pitched over the footstool and out.

She took off the dress and pulled the sweater over her head just in case he weren't finished.

Something shattered on the kitchen floor. Was the mickey taking too long to knock him out? Maybe she had diluted it too much with all the ice and pineapple juice.

Penelope heard a gasp, like somebody choking.

Forgetting about her skirt for the time being, she started toward the kitchen.

As she stepped through the door, something stung her neck. A mosquito?

"Damn!" said a distorted voice.

She staggered backward. Her bedroom was starting to swirl in lavender. "She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah." Burning lamb lavender mingled in her head. A woman in front of her was starting to spin, to swirl like a dancing snake. "Yeah, yeah, yeah."

But he was the one who had been drugged, she thought as she dropped to her knees.

It looked like Phil was taking something out of the black briefcase.

"No," she screamed, but it came out garbled. She had to hold out. She had to make that telephone call and tell them at last she was free.

For a split-second she focused clearly. She saw a black-gloved hand coming at her with something obscene.

"Please, Phil!"

And then she was free.

II

THE UPRIGHT, BRONZED UMBRELLA HANDLE TURNED slowly to the whir of an unseen electric motor. Coverless and outstretched spines, each a primary color, struck an interlocking airplane propeller that in turn drove by belt a treadmill on which had been welded two figures made of nails. As the treadmill turned, the

male figure, stationed six inches behind the female, engaged in perpetual pursuit.

"This one's called Human Frustration," read Tim Rourke from a brochure. "A superlative example of Contemporary Kinetic Art."

"It certainly is contemporary," mused Mike Shayne. "I think I put that umbrella in the trash last week."

"Come on, shamus," said his reporter friend. "There's more to the good life than a thick steak and a cold brew. I know—to you, culture is drinking Martell from a clean glass."

The rangy detective tugged again on the starched collar. He rueful the weak moment when he had agreed to put on his monkey suit and accompany the crack reporter of the *Miami Daily News* to the opening of an art exhibit at Magic City's Center for the Fine Arts. Even Rourke's offer of a steak dinner afterwards hadn't been enough, but his beautiful secretary had begged him to take her to the Tuesday night invitation-only showing.

"After all, Michael, breeding isn't just something you find at the Biscayne Kennel Club or Hialeah," she had chided.

It wasn't that he disliked art. Hell, he found the smile on the Mona Lisa as enigmatic as any case he had ever undertaken, but some of the stuff that passed for art these days would stink in a fish market. Last year some clown calling himself an "artiste" had draped several small islands off the coast in pink plastic skirts—and the government had subsidized his insanity.

The redhead said, "Have you seen my beautiful secretary?"

"No," said Rourke, flipping through the brochure's pages. "I don't think that one's in this exhibit."

"Cut the comedy, Tim. I've done my duty, and it's time to leave. Let's go find Lucy."

"If we hurry, we can drop by my office, and you can get a few more licks in on the computer."

"Let's go find Lucy."

The muscular detective and the scarecrow-thin reporter weaved their way through a sea of well-heeled patrons. Shayne saw more diamonds on display than in a Tiffany's showcase. A tall, young blonde in a sequined see-through smiled seductively as he passed and separated herself from a silver-haired septuagenarian. No doubt, he thought, she was his escort—or were they calling it "companion" nowadays?

He stepped around two elderly dowagers who were being strangled by their mink wraps. Searching the room for his secretary, Shayne spotted a ten-foot tall obelisk that was slightly tilted. Some artist had

probably become a rave by calling it The Leaning Tower of Miami.

The detective felt a warm breast push against his arm. A darkhaired woman stood beside him gazing at the same piece of sculpture. "For some reason," she said, looking at him languidly, "that really turns me on."

It was the first thing he had understood all night, Shayne thought.

"There's Lucy," interrupted Rourke with his usual sense of timing. "And look who's with her."

The big detective immediately recognized the tall figure with oily black hair standing beside his secretary. In his black dinner jacket trimmed in gold, Marcus Pendleton looked to the redhead more like a warm-up comedian for a Fountainbleau lounge act than an operative for the Bayonette Security Company.

"Oh, Michael," said Lucy Hamilton as the redhead approached, "Mark was just explaining the primal integrity of this painting."

Disregarding the nude portrait of a well-endowed woman, Shayne said, "Are you ready to go?"

Pendleton finished lighting up and tossed the golden-horned embossed matchbook on the floor. "Excuse me, but I was just asking the lady what she thought about this piece of work."

"Funny," said the redhead, looking at the litter, "I thought you ran out of questions after 'What's your sign?'."

"I consider the source, gumshoe," said the operative. "How could anybody who still drives an antique Buick and operates a one-man agency out of a condemned building know anything about nouveau art?" He turned toward Lucy Hamilton. "Say, sweetheart, when are you going to drop this joker and come to work for Bayonette?" He smiled through perfectly capped teeth.

Shayne knew the fringe benefits Pendleton had been trying to offer his secretary. "You ready, Lucy?"

"But, Michael, Mark has promised to show me a kinetic sculpture."

Shayne reached out and took the brunette gently by the elbow.

Pendleton grabbed the redhead by the arm. "The lady wants to stay."

The big detective swung his eyes toward the sweaty hand on his bicep. "You'd better be a kinetic artist, pal, and move your hand or I'll stage my own exhibition—how does 'Man Splattered on Art Gallery Wall' grab you?"

Rourke chuckled in the background.

"That's it, Shayne," said the operative. "Settle everything with your fists, don't you, dinosaur?"

"And what does a high-tech boy like you want, Pendleton?" spat

out the redhead. "Computers at twenty paces?"

"Don't push me, bozo. I've got a black belt."

"Me too," said Shayne, unbuttoning his jacket to reveal his cummerbund.

Lucy chuckled in the background.

"Excuse me," said Pendleton, "but I like to leave a lasting impression." He stepped down hard on Shayne's patent-leathers as he pivoted and stared at the redhead.

Like a striking snake, Shayne's hand shot out. Grabbing the oily operative's wrist, he twisted it and showed the man his palm.

Pendleton grimaced, almost as much in surprise as pain.

Shayne fixed his steel-gray eyes on the figure and said, "I believe a broken wrist takes about six weeks to heal. Is that lasting enough, pal?"

"So much for culture," said Rourke.

"Michael," hissed Lucy between her teeth, "don't embarrass me in here."

The redhead had the operative raised up on his toes like a ballet dancer, but let him go.

"I won't forget this, Shayne," said Pendleton. "Someday."

"But I've got to find him," interjected a female voice.

The big detective spotted the commotion at the doorway to the gallery. A matronly woman with snow-white hair and enwrapped in a black cape was trying to push her way past a pair of young security guards.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," said a uniformed officer, holding her back, "but this is by invitation only."

"You don't understand," she said, staring him down with grandmotherly eyes. "If you don't find him soon, she could be dead."

"Whoa, ma'am," said a security guard. "Who's the 'him'?"

The elderly woman rolled her eyes. "Why Mike Shayne, of course."

III

SHAYNE FIRED UP A CAMEL AS HE CIRCLED THE CON-temporary chrome chair. Rourke had talked the Center's director into letting them use his office for awhile. The reporter and Lucy Hamilton had withdrawn to an orange couch beneath the blown-up panel of a comic strip. Sitting in the center chair and wiping her eyes with an embroidered handkerchief was the matronly woman who had called out the detective's name. Her wrinkled face was a pasty white, and when the redhead looked down at her hair, he could see a bluish tinge.

"Mr. Shayne," she sobbed, "I'm sorry to impose on you this way.

It's just that, well, you have such a reputation . . . and I'm so worried . . . and your answering service said . . . said I could . . ."

"Now, calm down," urged the big detective, his voice washing over her like a soothing wave. "Ms. . . ."

"It's Mrs., Mrs. Windham St. Noire, but you can call me Lillie."

"Windham St. Noire," said Rourke. "St. Noire investments."

"Unfortunately," she said, "Windham passed away a few years ago."

"What can I do for you, Mrs. St. Noire?" said Shayne.

"Lillie." She smiled feebly.

"Lillie," said the redhead.

"It's about Penelope. Anyway, she . . ."

"Who's Penelope?" Shayne interrupted.

"My daughter." The elderly woman buried her face in the handkerchief, where the lack of colors blended. "We were so close until about a year and a half ago."

"What happened?"

"I really don't know. Whatever, we just seemed to drift apart. Penelope dropped out of business school and left home. For awhile she quit calling me or seeing me. She didn't even ask for money. What hurt the most was that about six months ago she relocated in Miami Beach and forbade me to even come to her apartment. Do you have children, Mr. Shayne?"

"No."

"Until you do, you'll never know how much they can hurt you."

Shayne changed the subject slightly. "Didn't I hear you tell the guard that she could be dead?"

"Yes."

"What makes you think that?"

"Her one concession lately has been to allow me to call her every Monday night at 10:00. We have a little chat. It's the highlight of my week. Last night I called, but Penelope didn't answer. I kept calling into the middle of the night. I've been trying all day, but still no answer."

"Perhaps she had to go out unexpectedly."

"No. Penelope knows how much our conversations mean to me. She wouldn't have missed one, and besides, if something had come up, she has an answering service. No. Mr. Shayne, something's wrong." She put away her handkerchief. "I am an old woman, and I have the money. Won't you please help me?"

It seemed to the redhead a simple request. Probably a forgetful daughter who had gone out on a date or a rebellious one who hadn't

answered to spite her mother. It wouldn't be the first time. But what the heck. "I'd be happy to look into it the first thing in the morning."

She pleaded with him using the same eyes he had seen her employ on the security guard earlier that evening.

"I was really hoping . . ." she said, "that you could . . . well . . ."

"Tonight," finished the detective. It beat another hour of contemporary nudes with primal integrity or interfacing with Rourke's computer. "I'll take a raincheck on that steak, Tim, and perhaps you can help Mrs. St. Noire get home while I drop Lucy off."

SHAYNE HAD LEFT HIS SECRETARY AT HER APARTMENT. In the entire time since his confrontation with Marcus Pendleton, she hadn't said a single word to him, not even a simple "Good night." Sometimes he could make more sense out of one of those modern painting that he could out of the emotional roller-coaster known as Lucy Hamilton.

The address Lillie St. Noire had given him belonged to a swanky highrise on the Beach, the turf of his nemesis, Chief Peter Painter. Obviously Penelope St. Noire had been doing well since moving out.

Shayne found the Seafoam's lobby well-lit and a guard with a Bayonette Security shoulder patch sitting at the doorway.

"Who would you like to see, sir?" said the middle-aged security man as he looked up from the 10:00 news.

"Miss Penelope St. Noire."

"1214," he said, pausing as though he recognized the detective. "And go right up. I'm sure she's expecting you."

Pressing the elevator button, the detective wondered if he had detected a smirk.

"Hey, buddy," called the guard as the doors opened, "what name should I put down for you? Smith as in John?" he laughed animalistically.

Long before he reached the twelfth floor, Shayne had a bad feeling about why Penelope St. Noire could afford to live in this luxurious building without taking any money from mommy. The buzzer got him no response. He knocked. Nothing.

He told himself he could come back the next day. Maybe he could find the super at this hour. Her neighbors were probably in bed, and there was the chance she was in sexual flagrante delicto.

Taking a chance and a lockpick, he opened the door in a few seconds.

The apartment had been tastefully decorated and distastefully

tossed. Out of habit Shayne threw a pillow back on a couch, straightened a picture of a beautiful woman tied to a stake with his handkerchief, and stood upright a chair. Her mother had been out of contact with her for a day and he didn't think it necessary, but still he drew the .38 from the shoulder rig he had worn beneath the tux.

Carefully he examined the living room, then the kitchen where hacked-up meat and dried eggs lay rotting. Slowly he entered a lavender-lighted bedroom. A mattress had been emptied on the floor.

His nostrils caught a more curious odor from the bathroom. With the barrel of his Smith & Wesson, he pushed open the door.

He had seen it many times before, but the filled bathtub overflowing with wine-colored water made him vomit. He held his head between his legs, not bothering to look any farther than the bone-white hand that emerged from the water like an obscene periscope.

A cough came from behind him.

"Hey, guys," said a voice, "I think we just found ourselves a promotion."

The detective didn't have to turn to know who the men standing in the bathroom doorway behind him were.

"Yeah," said another cop, "Chief Painter's gonna love it when we tell him we caught Mike Shayne at a murder scene with everything but blood on his hands."

IV

SHAYNE REMOVED THE CRAVAT THAT HAD BEEN CONSTRICTING his throat. It didn't help much. He knew he wasn't going to really feel better until he got Petey Painter off his back.

The redhead was sitting in a metal chair in the middle of an interrogation room. The walls were lined with white corkboard broken only by a locked door and a 4x6 one-way glass. Smoke enveloped him, partially diffusing the bright overhead fluorescents.

Shayne stubbed another Camel in the already overflowing hubcap that served as an ashtray. His Seiko read 11:40. He had been inside the room alone for forty-six minutes. Right now even the Center for the Fine Arts seemed inviting.

Petey Painter was probably sitting behind the mirror getting his jollies by watching him slowly bore himself to death. The least he could do, Shayne figured, was not to sweat and give the little martinet any more satisfaction. He was sure the Chief lay in bed at night having wet dreams about getting Mike Shayne in this position.

Suddenly the detective jumped up. He grabbed the chair and holding it behind his head ran toward the mirror. The redhead swung the chair

forward. "I can't take this any longer."

Inches from the plate glass, Shayne stopped. "O.K., Petey, we've both had our fun. Now get your butt in here."

Painter strode in immediately, wiping his brow with a monogrammed handkerchief. "Hey, Shayne," he said, twisting his face into a grin, "I would never have guessed you needed Benny Maples to provide you with an active love life."

"What do you mean?" The small man in the tan suit and pencil-thin mustache looked to Shayne like all he needed was a swagger stick and cap to direct the French Foreign Legion on a forced march across the Sahara.

"You don't expect me to believe that you didn't know our lovely corpse was a whore?" said the Chief.

Painter's callousness never ceased to amaze the redhead. "When did she die?"

"Unfortunately for me, over twelve hours ago, or I could pin her tail on you. Even a donkey like you wouldn't be dumb enough to return to the scene of the crime."

"How did she die?"

"What killed Penny St. Noire is private police business. What I want to know is what a low-life like you was doing at the apartment of a high-priced hooker?"

Shayne put his thumbs behind the lapels of the tux jacket. "We were engaged."

Against his will Painter's lips turned upwards, and he almost chuckled before he caught himself. "I can see you're going to hide behind the same old curtain, the confidentiality of client relationships. You private dicks burn me up."

"Hey, don't get so mad. We were going to invite you to the wedding."

"Get the hell out of here, Shayne, before I do book you, but keep your butt available in case I want to exchange pleasantries with you again."

"At your beck and call, Sir Petey," said Shayne as he started out. He stopped. "By the way, I've got to compliment you on your reaction time. You got to that apartment a few minutes after I had."

"The eternal vigilance of your Miami Beach police force is conducive to citizen cooperation."

"You mean you got an anonymous call?"

Painter just pointed to the door. "Out! Out! Out of my sight!"

That was the nice thing about interrogation rooms, decided Shayne as he departed. Unlike their mirrors, they worked two ways.

IT WAS ALMOST 11:00 WHEN THE BIG DETECTIVE ARRIVED at the address on the front side of the card Lillie St. Noire had given him. Like so many Miami Beach estates, the sprawling hacienda and grounds were surrounded by an eight-foot concrete wall. Strangely the wrought-iron gates were swung open.

He drove the Buick through.

This was the hardest part of the job—telling clients the one thing they never wanted to hear. But she had been so concerned he thought it better not to let the news wait until morning. Besides, it would be better to hear it from someone who was concerned rather than the insensitive and perfunctory voice of the police.

The blacktop drive was lined with cars, most of them limousines. It didn't make sense. Why would a distraught mother be entertaining guests with the situation being what it was? And why at such a late hour? He could understand one or two close friends coming by to comfort her, but even that seemed unlikely with her daughter missing for only a day. No, something was wrong, and that experienced voice in the back of his head told him to take out his notepad and jot down the license numbers.

Shayne travelled the crowded circle in front of the house and parked the Buick for the return trip. Stepping out, he noticed the main house's doors open and figures start to file out.

He was more puzzled than ever. They were all women. Wasn't it a bit late for a garden party?

Lillie St. Noire was standing in the doorway kissing her guests goodbye. The women passed him, their eyes swiveling, but none uttered a word.

"Mr. Shayne," she said, surprised at spotting the redhead approaching. She patted the last departing woman on the shoulder and smiled at him. "Let me invite you into my home," she said. "I just know that with such promptness you have good news for me."

The job wasn't getting any easier, Shayne thought as he followed the heavy-set woman through a crystal-lined foyer into a long dark hallway. The house seemed unusually cold. In the dim light he could barely make out the walls, but the elderly woman walked swiftly as if she had a bat's radar sense.

"I know it appears strange," she said, seeming reading his mind, "that I would be hosting a gathering at this time, but, you see, this meeting was planned months ago and, well, the show must go on—even when we don't think we can. I'm afraid I wasn't much of a hostess, but those fine ladies bore with me through a rather long evening. The sacrifices one makes for a good cause, I guess."

Her voice was still echoing as they emerged into a room that resembled the basement of a library with its musty old books lining the walls. He noticed a picture hanging on the far side that from where he stood looked like a larger copy of the one he had straightened at her daughter's.

"Sit down, please," she said, motioning toward a massive straight-back chair with ornate carving on the oak wood.

"I'm afraid I have bad news," he began.

Shayne was no more than ten words into describing what he had found earlier in the evening than she started crying. Leaving out only the gruesome details, he told her everything, then sat silently for several minutes waiting for her to compose herself.

When she spoke, all she said was, "Find out who did this horrible thing to my Penelope."

He let himself out, slowly finding his way down the labyrinthine corridor they had entered through. He hadn't bothered commenting that finding the killer was a job for the police. He knew she was aware of that. He would call her later, call her when she had had time to work things out. In the meantime he'd leave the file open, but he wouldn't do anything to fill it.

He pulled the Buick back through the still-open gates and headed toward Collins Avenue. Some days the job was almost more than he could stomach. Had he been a messenger in ancient days, for all the bad news he had brought, by now he would have been put to death a thousand times.

Fatigue had caught up with him when the headlights appeared in the rearview mirror. He heard the car behind him accelerate. He was vaguely aware as it pulled up beside him.

Suddenly the limo cut in front of him. He swerved. Hibiscus flowers rushed toward him as the Buick's nose plowed into a hedge.

The detective's head snapped forward, striking the steering wheel. His world started carouselling in a collage of colors.

Sometime later he felt two meaty hands jerk his shoulders backwards. He passed through the open window and dropped onto the road's edge.

A voice from behind said, "Looks like the sucker's almost dead."

"Good." A hand slapped Shayne's face. "Listen up, clown. "If you don't die, consider this a preview of what's going to happen if you don't stay away from Penny St. Noire's death."

read 4:30. Somewhere in the groggy reaches of his consciousness the detective realized he had slept through most of Wednesday, but he didn't care.

Slowly a hot shower and a brandy snifter full of Martell nursed him back to life. Beneath the pain that had taken possession of his body, he remembered crawling into his hotel-apartment about dawn, half-convinced he had died and not gone to heaven.

As he had pulled out of Lillie St. Noire's estate, he had thought he was finished with the case, that Petey Painter would eventually catch up with some doped-up john whose sadistic streak was longer than Penny's list of clientele. But the limo, the meaty hands, and the warning had changed his mind. Somebody didn't want him investigating the death of Penny St. Noire.

He picked up the Martell and the gauntlet. Nobody told Mike Shayne to butt out of a case.

After checking in with Lucy, he forced his mind to work. His major lead was the name Painter had dropped, Benny Maples. So Penny St. Noire had been in his stable. Somehow the daughter of a Miami Beach socialite didn't fit with the pimp. Neither the phone book nor the Miami Public Library would be any help in locating Maples, but the detective knew who would.

SHAYNE FOUND WHAT HE WANTED PARKED IN ITS USUAL
location outside Rick's Cafe Americain, a dive just off Biscayne Boulevard. The long Cadillac convertible was painted olive drab in a camouflage pattern. A four-star flag fluttered on the antenna, and the familiar license plate announced that the vehicle belonged to Miami's most flamboyant gentleman of leisure, Jerry King.

"How do you like my staff car, Michael, my man?"

Shayne turned to the speaker. Sauntering toward him was something that seemed to the redhead as a cross between General Patton and Michael Jackson. His gold helmet glittered in the fading afternoon sun. His military dress coat, trimmed with a mess of medals, braids, and ribbons, would have made the Commander of the Army look like a raw recruit. His red, white, and blue riding pants were tucked into gold-glitter knee boots with a two-inch heel.

"Do I salute or give you a high five?" Shayne chuckled.

"Whatever, Private . . . Eye." King broke up at his own joke.

The redhead had to admit he liked the guy. While he didn't condone the pimp's business, he found it difficult to dislike a man who was his own self-parody—and knew it. Jerry King enjoyed life, he never mistreated his girls, and he had told Shayne numerous times, "My girls

are clean. They have health certificates and don't do drugs. If guys want to play, I'll take their pay."

"What'll it be?" said King, motioning to the doorway.

Shayne watched as three girls in camouflage short-shorts and army t-shirts marched up and saluted King.

"Fox Patrol reporting for duty, sir," said one.

"You like the slogan, Michael?" said the pimp.

Across their t-shirts was stenciled A GREAT PLACE TO START. One of them snuggled up to the redhead. It was the warmest he had felt all day.

"Hey, Michael," said King, "Martha just wants you to be all that you can be. Tell the truth—how do you like the new look?"

Shayne remembered past appearances—the Uncle Sam look, the baseball look, and the month King had been into *Star Wars*. The redhead still laughed when he recalled what one john had told the pimp he could do with his light sabre. "Hey, general," Shayne said, playing along, "let's have a staff meeting."

"In my H.Q.?" said the pimp, pointing to the cafe.

"No: On the parade grounds here." Shayne lit up two Camels and gave one to King, who inserted it in a long holder. "What do you know about Benny Maples?"

"Bad News Benny. Drove his troops too hard, and they were already thin in the ranks, not too fat on their flanks."

"What do you mean?"

"The dude was only holding a deuce."

"Two working girls."

"His squad of two skinny ladies had a hard time establishing a beachhead in Painterville. Word in the field was the man was a mercenary."

"A mercenary?"

"Hired himself out to do anything as long as it baked his bread. Money. Maples wanted to advance in the ranks, get himself a commission—you know, be big time."

"You keep using the past tense."

King removed his helmet and held it across his chest. "You ain't heard? A couple of days ago they blowed 'Taps' for the man. That's right. He's gone to the big formation in the sky."

"He's dead."

"That's what I said. Monday they fished that sucker out of the big pond."

THE SETTING SUN GLINTED OFF THE LOBBY GLASS OF

Penny St. Noire's apartment building. As the redhead walked into the Seafoam, he had the distinct impression someone was watching him. He spotted the security guard from the night before on duty.

"Mr. Smith," he was greeted, "what can I do for you?"

"To start, pal," said Shayne, torching a Camel a few inches from the uniformed man's nose, "you can tell me why you called the cops last night."

"That's simple. I didn't."

"And you didn't know what was waiting for me up there?"

"Not till I saw them bring her down on a stretcher last night."

Shayne contemplated the smoke between himself and the uniformed man. "Show me your list of people who visited Miss St. Noire in the last few days."

"Sure, Shayne, but you're not going to learn anything. They all checked in as John Smith."

The redhead studied the guest list. One name stood out. "What about this Philip Jason at 6:02?"

The guard sat up. "Damn, I clean forgot about him. Funny guy too. Always insisted I put down Philip Jason. Got pissed off at me once when I tried to list him like all the other johns."

Shayne took out his notepad. "What does Philip Jason look like?"

"About your height, but quite a bit thinner. Gray hair. Always suits. Very polite. Typical businessman's briefcase."

The detective said, "Do you remember what time he left last night? There's nothing written in your book."

"Hey, I just check 'em in. Listen, buddy, this is a big job, too big for one man, but that's all the agency will send out here. I keep telling them I need more help. Between you and me, this place is not secure."

Considering the murder, Shayne thought it a gross understatement. "Do you know anything else about Jason?"

"Just that he showed up once a week on Mondays."

"Did the police ask you about Jason?"

"No. They said somebody'd be by to talk to me in detail, but nobody showed."

"Thanks." Penny St. Noire wasn't important enough for her file to go to the head of the class on Painter's desk, the redhead decided as he headed for the elevator. Thinking he heard a muffled scream, he glanced back at the lobby. Through the glass he saw a thin brunette running across the parking lot.

He stepped outside.

Two big guys in blue suits had cornered the girl.

The redhead drew closer.

"Throw her in the car," said one.

Shayne recognized the voice. It belonged to a hand from the night before.

The two men were preoccupied with dragging her towards a limo.

"Hold it, clowns," said Shayne.

One of the toughs faced him. "You again. Thought we told you to stay outta this."

"I guess I'm one of those guys who doesn't take directions well," said the rangy detective. "You want to explain them to me again."

"Sure," said a blue suit, pulling a billy club out from beneath his jacket.

He swooped down on Shayne with speed surprising for his size. The redhead felt the club whiz by his ear. As it passed by again, he countered with a sharp blow to the pug's nose.

The detective's assailant staggered backward, his eyes starting to water. Shayne stepped in the opening and delivered a roundhouse to the gut, then a two-handed uppercut to the chin.

The guy rolled backward onto the hot pavement.

Shayne heard a scream. "Look out!"

Absorbed with the fight, the detective had forgotten about the other tough who was now sitting behind the wheel of a rapidly advancing limo.

He and the girl were directly in its path.

She stood paralyzed.

Shayne closed the gap between them and hurled himself into her. They rolled across the blacktop.

The car screeched to a halt, and the fallen blue-suit tumbled into the passenger seat.

The limo left a trail of black smoke as it fishtailed across the parking lot.

Shayne looked down. The brunette lay limply in his meaty arms.

VI

SHAYNE CHOSE A BOOTH AT THE BACK OF THE RANCH House. The diner was almost deserted, the senior citizen regulars having eaten long before dusk. Now a couple of short-sleeved men with dark, wood-stained tans and white hair sat at the counter sipping coffee from worn porcelain cups. Still, the detective couldn't shake the impression he was being watched.

The young girl across from him fidgeted in her seat. Her deep-brown eyes shot furtively from side to side, and her cheeks quivered in their sallowness. Shayne reached out slowly and placed his hands on hers.

She jerked it away.

"Take it easy now," he said softly. "You're safe here."

The redhead motioned for the waitress to bring two cups of coffee. When she did, he ordered two sirloins with potatoes and salads.

"What was going on back there?" he asked over the lip of his cup.

"Mister, I don't have the foggiest."

"You mean you didn't know those jokers?"

"No."

Shayne could sense her reluctance. He watched as she loaded the coffee with sugar and cupped it with both hands. She looked really tired, shot, as if she had had the same kind of night he had. "You live at the Seafoam?"

"Not really."

"Visiting?"

"You might say that."

The waitress broke a long period of silence with the steaks. Shayne's companion devoured hers as if it had been her first food in days. Throughout the meal he studied her. She was attractive in a made-up way, but Shayne could see that at one time she had been truly beautiful.

Her looks, her manner, her dress along with what she had said struck a harmonious chord with the description Jerry King had given him earlier that afternoon.

Between bites, he dropped in, "You've been on your own since Benny was killed?"

"How did you know about Benny, mister?" She gulped down her coffee.

"Let's just say I was a friend of Penny's." The redhead lit a Camel and offered her one. She waved it off. He had a gut feeling she was used to stronger stuff.

She burst into sobs. "Oh, Penny. I can't believe she's dead, and Benny too. It's like a nightmare. Things like this didn't happen in Englewood."

Shayne could write the whole story. Small-town girl comes to the big city looking for glamour. But when the money runs out and there's no Mister Right, Mister Maples steps in with a quick solution. "Let me try again," he said when her tears subsided. "Don't you have any idea who those men were or what they wanted?"

She dried her eyes with a napkin, then looked into his. Something she saw reassured her. "Maybe. I got back today from a long weekend with a client and found Benny's place trashed. Since I got off the bus I've been staying with him, till I got established anyway. I got scared and ran to the one place I didn't think anybody'd find me."

"Penny's apartment," said Shayne.

"Yeah. Only these guys were waiting in the parking lot. They said Benny was dead and they wanted to know what he did with 'it.' "

"It? What's it?"

"I don't know. Mister, I don't know."

IT STRUCK SHAYNE THAT THE BLUE SUITS HAD PROBABLY had the Seafoam apartment watched. When she had bolted her place, they were waiting there and tried to grab her. Were they watching Penny's place two nights ago? Were they the ones who tossed it? Could they have killed Penny? It was a perfect bet that the jerks who had tried to grab her and had run him off the road the night before had something to do with Benny Maple's death.

He stubbed out a cigarette. "You were good friends with Penny."

She nodded.

"Did she ever mention a Philip Jason?"

"Kid gloves. Yep, he was her Monday night regular."

"Kid gloves?"

"That's what she always called him 'cause he never laid a hand on her. No sex. Just content to sit and talk. Wished some of my tricks were that way. Penny really liked the guy, looked forward to seeing him. I think he always left her a little more than the going rate."

"Did you ever meet the guy or see him?"

"No. Penny kept him to herself. I don't even think she told Benny about the extra cash he was laying on her."

Shayne realized that he had been talking to the girl for over half an hour and he didn't even know her name. Momentarily the redhead saw another young girl across from him, an ex-prostitute named Susan who had been trying to change her life into something meaningful. Yeah, she had been something special until life had broken her too.

"Mister, not that it matters, but I don't even know your name."

"Shayne, Mike Shayne. You're . . . ?"

"Dottie." She held out her hand and awkwardly shook his.

"Where are you gonna stay, Dottie?"

"I dunno." A tear crept into the corner of her right eye.

"There's always Englewood."

"I'd rather be dead. There's nothing back there for me."

"Suppose, Dottie, I put you up at an out-of-the-way hotel till I figure this thing out?"

She smiled weakly.

Shayne checked her into a cheap motel a few blocks away. Starting toward her room, she stopped abruptly.

"Incidentally, Mike, I appreciate your not wanting anything in return from me. Tell me, why are you so interested in a dead working girl?"

"I was hired by her mother."

"That bitch," Dottie muttered as she walked away.

THE MAIN THING SHAYNE LEARNED AT THE CITY MORGUE was that money opened more doors than a lockpick. The attendant was a pre-med student working his way through Florida American, Shayne guessed from the covered anatomy books that were opened across a desk.

The detective stuck a ten-spot between the pages. "Looks like you could use a bookmark."

The darkhaired man looked up. "What do you want?"

"Some information on one of your recent guests."

The attendant picked up the bill. "Who?"

"Benny Maples."

The man in white got up and opened a file cabinet. He thumbed through some folders, then pulled one out. "Benedict C. Maples. I.D. confirmed later by Lt. Thurman. She's in vice."

"How'd he die?"

"Take your pick. The guy was missing a couple of fingers and had contusions all over his body."

"Tortured?"

"Probably."

"Did he have any possessions on him?" said Shayne, thinking about the "it."

"You know, with all this studying I have a lot of trouble keeping my place in these books."

Shayne peeled off another bill.

The student said, "There was a broken recorder around his neck."

"A tape in it?"

"Nope. Empty."

"Where did they find the body?"

The attendant closed the manila folder. "I don't need records to remember that. I was here when a guy and his kid brought the corpse in. The guy stunk like a bait house. His name was . . . let's see . . . Manual Cortez. Said something about keeping a boat at the Tiburon Marina."

Shayne handed the kid another ten. "You've got a good memory."

"Let's hope you're right. I've got an anatomy test tomorrow."

Shayne could tell that, pass the test or not, with the kid's sense of

money he was going to make a good doctor.

VII

THE TIBURON MARINA WAS IN SOUTH MIAMI. THE BAL Harbor Yacht Club, the redhead could tell even in the pre-dawn darkness, it was not. A rutted dirt road that almost broke the Buick's rear axle was marked by rusting oil drums. Rickety, gray piers stretched into the ocean like the gnarled fingers of an old man. Shayne heard the muffled shouts and curses, mostly in Spanish, as shadow-like figures loaded fishing tackle and gas aboard trawlers that were in the same state of disrepair as the piers. Realizing that the fishermen would be putting to sea early, the big detective had dragged himself out of the sack at 3:30.

Thoughts raced through Shayne's head like the hot java that coursed through his body. How much had changed in the short space of a day. Twenty-four hours ago he had all but given the case up, but now a troop transport of blue-suited goons couldn't have kept him away. Benny Maples and a young girl had both been killed because they had something somebody wanted bad, and the odds were it was on tape. The fact they were still after Dottie meant that the big blue team didn't have it.

What could a small-time pimp with big-time hopes possess that was already worth two new plots in the cemetery?

And Philip Jason—how did he fit in? Penny St. Noire's mystery john had been in her apartment immediately before her death. If he hadn't desired sex, what did he want from her? The unknown "it"? Had his Monday visits to her been some kind of ruse to find "it"? Maybe Jason had run out of patience with that scheme, so he had resorted to violence by first torturing the pimp and then his lady. If so, a new possibility loomed—the blue-suit team was led by Jason.

The stench of dead fish and salt-sea air assaulted Shayne's senses as he stepped into the early-morning mist. Wraith-like figures moved slowly in front of him as if in a dream. The redhead stopped one of them carrying a chum bucket.

"Cortez," he said. "Manuel Cortez?"

Without looking up, the stooped-over man pointed to the end of a pier.

Walking down the squeaking, rotting planks, the detective could barely make out the boat's name, NINA. A bearded man and a boy who looked about twelve were readying to cast off.

Shayne zipped up his windbreaker against the cold morning breeze off the white-capped water. "Mr. Cortez," he called.

Drawing closer, the redhead could see clearly that the bigger figure cradled a large green wine jug in his arms the way a mother would a baby. The man's wet and stained t-shirt suggested that he had spilled more spirits than he had swigged.

"My name is Cortez," the paunchy man slurred, "but nobody's called me Mister for years now. What do you want?"

Shayne stepped aboard the creaky vessel that seemed just a good gust of wind away from sinking. He held out his wallet with his investigator's license. "My name's Shayne, and I'd like to ask you a few questions about that body you fished out of the drink."

Fear pushed intoxication aside in the bearded man's eyes. "I told you, Peter," he said to the boy, "the body would bring nothing but bad luck."

"Poppa," said the boy.

"Where exactly did you find the body?" the redhead asked.

The man turned away. "We are late already."

The boy pointed toward the horizon, where a faint light was starting to glow. "Out there. We could just make out the shore."

"Shut up, Peter," the man growled.

The boy continued, "He was tied to a log, just floating."

Recalling the empty tape recorder, Shayne said, "Did you find anything out there that you didn't tell the people at the morgue about?"

"No!" snapped the man.

"Tell him, Poppa," pleaded the boy.

"Tell me why you want to know all this?" said the man.

It struck Shayne that maybe the man couldn't read. "Mr. Cortez, I'm a private investigator, not a policeman. I just need some information."

"We have nothing for you," the man said.

"Please tell him, Poppa. It's not the body that brings us bad luck. It is the other thing we found."

"What other thing?" said the redhead, staring directly at the fisherman.

Cortez hesitated, then removed the wood cover from the hold. The odor was nauseous as the bearded man pointed.

In the darkness Shayne saw what looked like a small bale of hay wrapped in plastic. A load of grass if he didn't miss his guess.

"Madre Dios," cursed Cortez. "The devil take it."

"Where did you find it?" said the detective.

"Near the body," said Peter. "There were some planks around it."

"Planks?" said the detective. "Out in the ocean?"

"I think a boat went down," said Cortez, "leaving us with this treasure of the devil."

A horn sounded. Shayne's head jerked around toward the shore.

At the other end of the pier sat a pearl-white Mercedes 380SL.

Because of both the pre-dawn darkness and the sports car's opaque windows, Shayne couldn't make out the people inside.

"Hey, NINA," called a voice from within the car, "I hear you got a big catch for sale."

"What does he mean, Poppa?" said Peter.

The bearded man took a swig of wine. "Tuesday I put the word out I had something of great value to sell."

The car door opened, and a figure stepped out.

Shayne was as surprised as the Cortezes. The driver of the Mercedes couldn't have been too much older than Peter. His red and white aviator jacket was pulled up on his arms, and he was wearing designer jeans, high-top sneakers, and huge sunglasses.

The decked-out kid advanced toward the big detective, bouncing as he walked. Removing his shades, he circled Shayne. "So you're the competition?"

"Pal," said the redhead, giving him the once-over, "in an outfit like that, you're in a league all by yourself."

The kid pulled out a roll of bills from his silk shirt pocket. "O.K., Chico," he said to Cortez, "how much do you want for the stuff?"

"The name is not Chico," spat out the bearded man.

"Poppa," said his son.

"Hush, Peter," said the old man.

"No offense, my man," said the visitor. "Brown is beautiful too. Whatever the Hulk here said he'd give you, I'll top it."

Shayne was about to get rid of the kid when Cortez spoke up. "I've changed my mind. I no longer wish to sell what I found."

"What chu mean putting up a NO SALE sign?" said the kid angrily. "I can make you rich. Give you enough to buy the PINTA and the SANTA MARIA to go along with this tub."

"No. It's my final word."

"Nothing's over till it's over, Chico," said the kid. "Old Slick's got connections. Tell you what—you play ball with me, and I'll introduce Peter Pan here"—he pointed to the boy—"to my boss, Mr. Horne. He could set little Peter up running numbers, delivering some dope, locating plastic money. Look what Mr. H has done for me."

Shayne stepped between the bearded man and the flashy-dressed kid. "If that's a letter of recommendation, Old Slick, I don't think we want to meet the recommender. And since you're having trouble

understanding, let me be the interpreter. Watch my lips. Get your ass off the boat or the fishies this morning are going to have some over-dressed bait."

The kid backpeddled onto the pier. "Lighten up, dudes. Old Slick can see where you're coming from, and he's not into hostility. You touch one hair of my head, and Mr. H will put all of you in a sling permanently."

Shayne watched the kid saunter back to the Mercedes. With the overcooked cool always associated with street punks, the detective would make book the kid wouldn't be around long enough to blow out twenty-one candles.

At the car the early-morning visitor turned. "Hey, Red, you win this round, but nobody's gone the distance with Old Slick yet."

It struck Shayne as the youngest threat he had ever received.

VIII

AFTER A SMALL BREAKFAST OF SOME EGGS, BACON, AND waffles at the Greasy Spoon, Shayne headed for his office. His stomach was filled, and his mind was no less empty of thoughts. Penny St. Noire's funeral was today. That meant sooner or later he'd have to talk with Lillie. As he pulled off I-95, he couldn't shake that feeling he had had that somebody was tailing him. Also, something Dottie had told him the night before had lodged in his throat. He wanted to talk to her, but maybe the telephone in his office was safer than driving over.

The last thing he needed when he walked in his Flagler Street office was to see Marcus Pendleton sitting on his secretary's desk. Worse, Lucy was smiling.

"Michael," said the pert brunette, "Mark was just telling me about gambling in the Bahamas, and he . . ."

"Invited you to go along next time," finished the redhead.

"How did you know?"

"Reading his mind has the same difficulty as walking and chewing gum at the same time," said the detective. "You want anything else, Pendleton, or are you going to waste my secretary's whole morning?"

Pendleton unbuttoned his white jacket. "Bayonette Security has hired up a lot of small-potatoes P.I.'s in this city recently, Shayne. I can see why you're not one of them."

"A few nights ago you wanted to trade punches. Now it's insults. What'll it be next time, Pendleton—bubble gum cards?"

"This is a professional visit." He looked straight at Lucy Hamilton. "Unlike you, I know how to keep my professional life separate from my private."

Shayne grabbed Pendleton's wrist and slung him through the open door marked PRIVATE. Inside his office the detective stood in the operative's face. "Don't ever say something like that in front of her again."

Pendleton backed up and rubbed his wrist. "I'll keep this simple so even you can understand. Whether you know it or not, in the last few years I've gotten pretty high in Bayonette."

"The miracles of modern chemistry."

Pendleton ignored the remark. "One of my jobs is overseeing our private security contracts. Anyway, I found out you've been hassling one of our employees over at Seafoam."

"That's one job I wouldn't brag about," said Shayne, lighting up a Camel. "A girl died there under your security."

"That's not the point. Peckham out there's just doing his job. Don't hassle him when you've got something against me."

For a second the redhead wondered if what Pendleton had said had a grain of truth in it. The detective couldn't deny he hated huge security organizations like Bayonette in general and oily operatives like Pendleton specifically. "You made your point," he said. "Now get out. I've got a phone call to make."

The operative pivoted and left.

As he dialed the cheap motel off Collins Avenue, Shayne was glad to have someone depart and not leave a threat behind. They were destroying his view of human nature. The clerk put him through to Dottie.

The phone rang, but nobody answered.

"Sir," said the clerk.

"Let it ring."

Shayne counted. On the twenty-third ring he heard a feminine voice. "Hello."

"Mike Shayne," he said. "Did I wake you?"

"No, I was just taking a shower. Incidentally, thanks for leaving money for my breakfast."

"Just stay put. They can bring you lunch and supper too."

"O.K., I got this thing for soap operas anyway."

"Something's been bothering me since last night," said the detective. "What did you mean when you said Penny's mother was a bitch?"

"Not much. Guess I was just repeating what Penny used to say."

"Why did she think that?"

"Her mother used to constantly remind her how much little Penny owed her."

"Owed?"

"Yeah, Penny was adopted, and her mother never let her forget it."

"Thanks."

"I'd really like to go to the funeral. I saw in the *Daily News* it's today."

"I understand, but don't. It may not be safe. O.K.?"

The prostitute hung up without answering his question.

Shayne got up from his desk and hurried through the waiting room.

"Where are you going?" said his secretary.

"To lunch," he said. "The kind that makes your stomach turn."

IX

SHAYNE DROVE SOUTHEAST TO COCOANUT GROVE. IT had been almost a hundred years since the first hotel-restaurant had been opened in Miami, and now the city had many that were known throughout the world for their fine cuisine. The Cornucopia was the exception.

The redhead knew the whole story. Originally a hotel that had served Flagler when he brought his railroad to Miami, it had fallen on hard times. It had been bought in the post-World War II boom by Theotis Horne, a small-time racketeer. When he had died, it had passed to his son Farrell, who had used it as their base for a chain, the Horne-of-Plenty restaurants with their distinctive goat's horn emblem.

The lunch crowd had already started to gather. Going through the brigade of tagmen in the front wasn't worth it, so Shayne wheeled the Buick around and parked in the rear alley. Farrell Horne was at the center of a great deal of crime in the Magic City, and thanks to a tip from a big-mouthed kid, the detective was going to probe whether one of his tentacles stretched out to a dead Miami Beach hooker. It seemed like the perfect time for the direct approach.

Leaving his blue sports coat in the car, he rolled up his white shirt sleeves and picked up a metal trash container. He hoisted it up on his shoulder and walked through the restaurant's rear entrance. If any of the service personnel asked what he was doing, he was going to have a hard time restraining himself from saying, "Making a delivery."

The cooks were preoccupied with several ingenious food-making machines. From kitchen Shayne peered through the swinging doors. Farrell Horne, his prematurely bald head reflecting daylight that cascaded through a skylight, was drinking wine with a beautiful redhaired woman half his age. Shayne remembered reading how she had been some chorine he had married six months after his original wife had been struck by a car. It was a tossup whether the rotund ganglord lusted after the steak in front of her or what her low-cut

sundress revealed.

Two tagmen sat by the front door, alternately chewing on toothpicks and candy they took from a brandy snifter beside cashier.

Still carrying the trashcan, Shayne walked deliberately to the side of the restaurant directly across from Horne. Two businessmen in gray suits were engrossed in salads and conversation. Without a word Shayne deposited the trashcan's contents between them.

"It's on the house," he said as the stared in amazement. "Mr. Horne swears you won't be able to tell the difference."

And then he was gone.

The businessmen started hollering.

Shayne sent a waiter and two busboys over.

The tagmen turned their attention to the loud table. The lunch crowd looked up to see what the commotion was about.

Just as Horne said, "What the hell!" the rawboned redhead sat down across from him.

"What's that?" said Horne, the juice from his wife's steak running out the corner of his mouth.

"A diversion," said the detective, picking up a complimentary book of matches and torching a Camel. "Actually, I wanted to give your patrons a hint how you cheat them daily."

"What are you talking about, Shayne?"

"Prefabricating. Like those machines you've got in the kitchen that mold cheap whitefish, mix it with fish paste, and squirt it out in the shape of crab legs." Shayne crammed the cigarette pack and matches into his pocket.

"You working for the Sanitation Department or the Consumers Bureau now?" asked Horne.

"Actually, I'm with the Department of Truth."

"What?"

The redhead knew he was just shaking the chicken coop to see if he could scare out the fox. Fact one—the marijuana had been found near where Benny Maples had been tortured and left adrift. Fact two—a representative of Horne's had shown up rather quickly to purchase the marijuana. Was it a coincidence or was Horne trying to cover some tracks? The redhead had chosen the latter. "What connection did you have with Benny Maples?"

"You're disturbing my wife's lunch," said the bald man.

Shayne glanced at the redhaired woman who sat there smoking a cigarette as if nothing more than a discussion of last night's ballgame were going on. "Benny Maples, was he part of your operation?"

"Funny you should bring up operations, Shayne," said Horne.

"You're about to have one."

The redhead felt himself jerked backward out of his chair. Somebody was holding each shoulder. Shayne was dragged toward the kitchen. He tilted his head back.

Instead of the tagmen he was staring at the same two blue-suited toughs he had met twice before in Miami Beach.

That was problem in shaking the chicken coop. Sometimes the farmer showed up with a gun.

As they pulled him through the kitchen doors, Shayne stuck out his feet and caught either side of the frame.

As the jolt came, he slipped from the men's grasp.

He rose up with a roundhouse right. One of the blue-suits staggered backward into a stove covered with steaming soup. He grabbed the cauldron and charged Shayne.

As a waiter came unsuspectingly through the same doors, the redhead grabbed his tray.

The hot split-pea soup flew at Shayne's face.

He held the tray up. The soup burned his fingers.

He was struck from behind and went down.

He rolled under a metal table and out the other side.

A pastry chef tripped over him.

Shayne didn't understand a single French curse.

The two tagmen from the front of the restaurant emerged through the doors.

Shayne hurled the only two things he could find, two legs of lamb. It was time to make his exit.

The two blue suits were coming down the aisle at him.

The detective picked up a container and rolled it toward them. Fish entrails spilled out its mouth.

"No guns," somebody shouted. "There are paying customers here."

Something wooden caught Shayne on the side of the head. He went down to one knee. A steel toe crushed a rib. He winced and rolled with it.

He was grabbed from behind. The redhead threw an elbow and felt it strike flesh. He spun around.

A punch flew by his ear. He caught a tagman with a kick to the groin.

By now several busboys had joined the cooks.

"Is this any way to treat a city health inspector?" said Shayne.

Two of the cooks stepped between Shayne and a blue-suit.

Quickly Shayne backpedalled to the exit and dashed out.

The sudden sunlight hurt his eyes, but just as he squinted he caught a glimpse of somebody standing behind the Buick looking his way. The

man had gray hair, a rumpled tan suit, a long growth on his face, and was about Shayne's height but a little thinner.

Exactly the way he remembered one Phillip Jason had been described to him.

X

HEARING THE FOOTSTEPS BEHIND HIM, SHAYNE MADE A fast decision. "Get in the car—quick!" he yelled at the thin man.

The figure hesitated behind the Buick. The restaurant door flew open, and the blue-suits came hurrying through.

Shayne slid behind the wheel.

Still the man he thought to be Jason was frozen. Starting the engine Shayne called, "Those guys aren't checking American Express cards, pal."

The man jumped into the passenger seat.

Shayne fried his tires.

The blue-suited thugs shook their fists angrily and made several obscene gestures amidst the smoke and dust.

The big detective headed for the Interstate. Using the mobile phone, he called Lucy. "As of this moment, Angel, you're on vacation until further notice," he barked.

"But, Michael . . ."

"No buts—get out of there quick. I'll call you."

"You got a cigarette?" said Shayne's passenger.

"Yeah," said the redhead, handing him a Camel. "How long have you been following me?"

The man took the cigarette with trembling hands and made several passes with a match before success. "I didn't know I was that obvious." He blew out a gust of smoke with the words.

"I'd guess you've been on my tail since Tuesday night, Jason." The detective looked straight ahead.

"You're as good as the papers say, Shayne. And you're right. I've been following you since you showed up at Julie's apartment."

"Julie? Who's Julie?"

"Everybody knows . . . knew her as Penny St. Noire." Jason drug hard on the Camel. "But that's not her real name. It's Julie, Julie Pope. And my name's not Philip Jason, either—that's just what I called myself to meet her. My real name's Richard Pope. You see, Julie . . . Penny was my sister."

SHAYNE FILLED POPE'S GLASS WITH BOURBON. POPE TOOK

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it, his now steady hand pushing aside the empty plate that had held cornbeef hash and eggs. The redhead sat down in his favorite chair directly across from the bearding man. His apartment-hotel seemed the safest place for awhile.

"When the crash killed out parents," Pope continued, "I was sixteen and Julie was two. The child welfare people wouldn't let me take care of her. They stuck her in an orphanage because Mom and Dad had no living relatives. I got really pissed, lied about my age, and joined the Marines. When my tour ended, I came back to the States and checked the orphanage. Julie was gone, and they wouldn't tell me who had adopted her."

"What then?" said Shayne, pouring himself a Martell.

"I ran into nothing but stone walls trying to find her, so after awhile I re-upped and went back to Europe. That was the end of it until about two years ago. I had never married, had never really had anybody to get close to. You know, Shayne, a man needs family, roots. So I decided I'd look again for my sister."

"What made you think you'd have better success after all those years?"

"A Marine officer is not without resources, contacts. Anyway, I managed to trace her here. I had a lot of accrued leave time, so I came to Miami for a reunion. Imagine my surprise when I discovered my baby sister was a . . . whore."

The military man had probably had a lot of practice concealing his feelings, but Shayne could read the hurt on Pope's face. "So you made up Philip Jason and started visiting her."

"That's right. Every Monday I showed up and spent the evening. I pretended to be a married businessman so I could talk to her, sort of live out the life we might have had if our parents hadn't died. I even left her extra money, but I could never work up the courage to tell her the truth." He laughed nervously. "Here's a guy who could face down an angry mob in Saigon, but couldn't look his own sister in the eye and tell her who he was."

"You were afraid she'd blame you for leaving her, for running away."

"Yes. Right or wrong, I felt guilty." Pope gulped down the remainder of the bourbon.

When Shayne had refilled his glass, he said, "You were in her apartment Tuesday night—what really happened?"

"I'm not sure. For some reason Julie drugged my drink. Anyway, I was starting to get groggy. I saw, or may have dreamed I saw, two men come into the apartment. I guess they thought I was out of it because

they stepped past me and headed for Julie's room. I heard screams, loud voices, slaps. I tried to move, to help her, but I couldn't. Then everything went black."

"If you were passed out, the intruders probably reasoned they had a perfect patsy."

"That's what I thought when I came to and found Julie's body. Shayne, I can't tell you how hard it was to run out of that apartment, to leave my sister's body bleeding in that tub. But I knew the police would never believe my story."

"So you waited at a safe distance to see what would happen?"

"Yes, and when nobody showed, I got nervous. That next night you appeared, and I decided to call the police. I mean, you might have been one of them coming back to hide the body or something. In my imagination I could see you taking the body and nobody ever knowing about Julie's death. I couldn't bear the thought of Julie's killer escaping justice, so I called."

Shayne could understand the twisted state of mind of a man who has just found his sister brutally murdered. "When did you decide I wasn't a murderer?"

"I followed you to the police department. All the station talk was about you and who you were. I guessed you must have had some connection with Julie or you wouldn't have shown up at her apartment. Your reputation around town is a good one, so I figured you'd try to get to the bottom of things, and I could just tag along in the shadows. Look, it was the only chance I had. What else could I do?"

The redhead rotated the warm Martell glass in his palms. "Do you remember anything else about the scene of your sister's murder?"

"No." Pope buried his face in his hands.

"Is there anything else you can recall from your other visits to Julie that might suggest why somebody wanted to hurt her?"

Pope raised his head and stared at Shayne. "It's a cliche, but I don't think Julie had an enemy in this world. She talked a lot about the men in her life. Some of them were kinky, but not violent. Nope, no enemies I can recall—except maybe one."

"Who?"

Pope set down the liquor glass with a thud. "Her stepmother, the one she called the Queen of Witches."

XI

THE FRIDAY MORNING SUN STREAMING THROUGH THE Buick's windshield seemed woefully wrong to the redhead. With all the violence and death, a hurricane would have been more appropriate

weather.

He turned off Collins. Pope had looked like he would sleep through the day when the redhead had left him at the apartment-hotel. The detective wasn't totally convinced by Pope's story, but until something better came along, it was the best explanation of the strange situation in which he found himself. All the more reason, thought Shayne, to discover the truth.

It was just past 9:00 when he pulled through the gate to the St. Noire estate. This time the entrance drive was empty. He noticed, in fact, that the entire place was devoid of activity—no gardeners, no handymen, no nobody.

As strange as Pope's description of Lillie St. Noire had been, it was a thread that bore investigation. And after talking with his client, he was going to check with Dottie to see if she could add anything to Pope's charge. Julie's mother had been called some pretty harsh names by two people. Was she really the wicked stepmother, or worse, the wicked witch of the West?

Wearing a black robe, Lillie St. Noire opened the door and said, "I've been calling your office, but all I get is the answering service telling me to leave my message. Mr. Shayne, where have you been?"

Shayne stepped in. The woman jumped back with a start as though he were an evil spirit invading her home. Last time, he remembered, she had made a point of inviting him in.

"Go to the library," she stammered. "There's something I must take care of before we talk." With that she disappeared through a door to the side of the foyer.

Shayne found his way down the darkened corridor. His nostrils picked up the faint trace of candles and incense. Had she been keeping some kind of night vigil for her departed daughter?

Like the outside, the inside of the house showed no signs of life. The library loomed before him. Entering, he walked around the dimly lit room. Dust flew as he parted a curtain. By the faint morning light that filtered through stained glass windows, he could barely read the titles on the leather-bound volumes that lay everywhere. They were in Latin and other strange languages.

Oils in gilded frames glared down at him. Something struck him about the portraits. They were all of women. Again he was drawn to the largest, the one of the woman at the stake just like the smaller version at Julie's. He knew it was old because scribbled in the corner was the date 5/17/1793.

"My late husband was an avid collector of beautiful women," said Lillie St. Noire. "Come and sit down."

"What did you want to see me about?" said the detective.

"Yesterday was the funeral. I made a decision there. My daughter's death has been very painful, and I wish to put it fully behind me."

Shayne knew what was coming next.

"I want you to drop your investigation. I have every confidence the police will bring the guilty party to justice." She pulled a check out of the folds of her left sleeve. "I'm sure this will compensate you for your time and trouble."

The big detective glanced down. Four figures were certainly sufficient, and there was merit in what she said. Hadn't he been going to tell her the same thing? But—he was too deep in this case. "Of course," he said, "if you think this is best for Julie."

For a moment she looked startled. "Well, I can see you have already earned your pay."

"One thing—why didn't you tell me Julie was adopted?"

"It wasn't important. The moment I adopted her, she became my daughter, the daughter I couldn't have naturally. I changed her name to Penelope to so indicate, to signify her true identity. Tell me, how did you find out?"

"A detective never reveals his sources."

She stood up. "Very well. This concludes our business."

"One more thing—that's Joan of Arc, isn't it?" he said, pointing to the portrait he had been looking at. "Wasn't she burned at the stake for being a witch?"

"Yes. An immortal tribute to ignorance, don't you think?"

Shayne smiled back. It was an ambiguous parry of his thrust. "I guess I should take the word of an expert."

Her eyes fixed him, the matronly glow gone. "What are you getting at, Mr. Shayne?"

"Just making a passing observation." He gestured around the room.

"In his last year Windham, my late husband, turned to spiritualism, but lots of desperate men, including Arthur Conan Doyle, do. The paraphernalia you see are mere relics of a dying man's preoccupation. Many of his competitors, his detractors, still stoop to name-calling."

She threw her arms out and her face reddened. "Those detestable blackguards went so far as to level the ludicrous charge that I was a witch somehow influencing my husband's investment business. I'm convinced his fatal stroke was brought on by the stress attributable to the consequential loss of business. So, before you repeat such gossip, I would ask you to consider the consequences. Good day!"

Knowing when he had been dismissed, Shayne headed for the door. Outside he encountered the same almost-eerie emptiness as before. Sure

her story was plausible, but like everything else about this case, there was nothing he could grab with absolute certainty.

As the Buick turned back down the drive, he almost ran headlong into a huge, black limousine. Quickly Shayne cut the wheel and skidded to a stop on the finely cut lawn.

The limo continued toward the house with complete indifference. Shayne's steel-gray eyes couldn't miss the license plate—HORNE 2.

XII

AS THE ELEVATOR DOOR OPENED ON HIS FLOOR, SHAYNE'S sixth sense told him something was wrong. He reached into the small of his back and got a grip on his .38.

His apartment door was splintered where the lock had been, but still closed. He entered in a crouch.

While he had been out, the hurricane he had thought more appropriate for a day like this one had swept through his apartment. Magazines and newspapers were strewn throughout. He picked up a copy of the book Tim Rourke had given him to read, *Making Friends with the Computer*. Drawers had been ransacked, and his clothes littered the bedroom. The couch would have to be reupholstered now. Someone had transformed the covers into cloth confetti and yanked out the stuffing.

Most importantly, Richard Pope was missing.

Satisfied that nobody was inside, Shayne called the desk and reported the incident. Then he opened his linen closet and pulled out the bottle of Martell he had been saving for a rainy day. Today was close enough.

If he had nothing to grab before, now he couldn't even make out the shape of the things to grab. Starting with the premise "what do I know" brought a simple answer—NOTHING.

Shayne wrapped his lips around the neck and took a deep drink. The warm cognac oozed down his throat. Could he have been wrong about Philip Jason/Richard Pope? Could the man have told a monstrous lie to get into Shayne's apartment? Hell, it would have been just as easy to break in. Somebody had tossed the place and not professionally, not with any plan. It looked like frustration at work. Was that somebody still looking for the mysterious "it" that had already cost two people their lives?

The redhead took another drink. Was Jason/Pope working for Horne? The detective doubted it. The fearful look on his face behind the restaurant had seemed genuine. Either somebody had broken in while his visitor was there, or someone had tried to make it look that

way. If it had been Horne's men, the apartment-hotel wasn't the safest place in the world, or by Dottie's logic it was.

Dottie. He had forgotten to check on her.

Shayne began to pace the room. The more he walked, the angrier he got. That morning he had been terminated from the case, but now he was the man in the middle. It was his property that was being destroyed. Well, by God, for that somebody owed him, and the Cornucopia seemed the best place to collect on the bill.

For a lot of good reasons.

No matter how many times the big detective replayed the record, the hole in the middle remained the same—Farrell Horne. A hooker, whose long-lost brother claims her adoptive mother might be a witch, ends up beaten to death. Her pimp, who probably taped something somebody wanted kept private, turns up a victim of the same m.o. Then, a car that shows up at the witch-mother's estate belongs to a notorious crime boss who's dealing dope and violence, the same boss whose men roughed up one of the pimp's girls in search of what the pimp had.

Shayne capped the Martell. He had enough problems without a pack of pink elephants performing in the center ring of his brain. It was time to return to the Cornucopia.

The redhead was just starting through the door when the phone rang from beneath a stack of newspapers. The detective hesitated, then picked the receiver up.

"Shayne," he said.

"You can't stay out of trouble, can you?" said the caller.

"What do you want, Painter?"

"A clerk at a hot-sheet motel off Collins tells us you checked in some bimbo the other night."

"So? Maybe I did."

"Well, she just checked out—permanently."

"What are you talking about?"

"One Dorothy Lewis, small-time whore and former employee of the late Benny Maples, was found in her room this morning looking much like a side of beef Rocky had worked out with."

Shayne cupped his hand over the receiver and uttered a "Damn." Dottie had probably gone to Julie/Penny's funeral anyway, and somebody had followed her back. If only he had checked.

"This is the second body in less than a week you've been associated with, Shayne. One more strike and you're out. Get the picture?"

Suddenly the redhead did.

SHAYNE PUT AWAY HIS PICK AND CLOSED THE DOOR TO

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Penny's apartment. It hadn't been hard to slip past the Bayonette security guard who was watching a soap opera on his portable TV.

The detective walked deliberately to the desk in the living room. The mini-computer sat there, its green screen blank. He opened the drive. A single floppy disk sat inside. He picked up the nearby telephone. It reached the modem.

The redhead walked over to the picture of Joan of Arc he had spotted when he had first come to the apartment. The smaller version was indeed different, he thought as he looked closely. The red numbers at the bottom had been altered by what appeared to be fingernail polish to read 5/49/1998—an impossible date.

Shayne picked up the phone and dialed the *Daily News*.

Rourke answered.

"Tim," said the detective, "I need your help."

"What timing. You caught me brown-bagging, shamus."

"You know how you've been after me to join the computer age?"

"Yeah, dinosaur."

"How'd you like to come over and give me a lesson—right now?"

XIII

DISREGARDING THE RESERVED SIGN, SHAYNE PARKED right behind the long limo in front of the Cornucopia. The HORNE-1 plate staring him in the face, he got out and checked the Cadillac over. The car's right front window was cracked to prevent a build up of late-afternoon heat.

The redhead pulled out the matches with the golden goat's horn logo he had picked up during his last trip to the restaurant. He torched two Camels, then tossed them through the window.

As Shayne came through the front door, the two tagmen straightened up, obviously recognizing the detective.

"Hey, buddy," said the one on the right, "we have a score to settle with you."

"No time for amenities, fellas," returned Shayne. "I think your boss's limo has overheated in the sun." The redhead pointed to the street where smoke poured through the opened window.

The two toughs dashed for the car, and a hostess wearing a smile and not much else approached.

"Mr. Horne's expecting me," he said, passing her.

The redhead sat down directly across the table from a solitary Farrell Horne. The two blue-suits behind the table started forward.

"Call off your attack dogs," said the redhead, "or I'll feed them a bone they can't swallow."

"Why should I?"

"Because I've got the very thing you've been trying to get them to fetch."

Like a magician Horne waved his hand and they disappeared.

Shayne said, "I'm sorry your lovely wife can't be with us."

"Laura Lee's choosey about who she eats with." Horne motioned to have his drink refilled. "What have you got? I assume it's for sale."

The detective reached inside his sports coat and pulled out some fanfold sheets. "Benny Maples was quite an operator, wasn't he? Sure he was a little fish, but he wanted to swim with the sharks. He took all your orders and let you kick him around. All the time he was quietly collecting as much information on your operation as he could."

"What kind of fish story are you telling?"

Shayne glanced at the printouts. "I wonder if the I.R.S. knows your northside bookmaking operation raked in some \$45,000 last week. Then there's the numbers run by Slick on . . ."

"Hold it!" Horne pulled out his checkbook. "How much?"

"Like I told you last time, I'm from the Department of Truth. If I don't miss my guess, Benny was gathering a little information about one of your deals on his trusty tape recorder last weekend when you fed him to the sharks."

"For a detective you've got a great imagination."

"Tell me, did he try to bargain with you with what he had, or did you catch him taping your conversations?"

The bald man sat silently.

"Let me guess that in either case he told you had had been doing it for a long time," continued Shayne. "You didn't really believe him, but you couldn't take a chance, so you had Benny's joint tossed and his ladies threatened."

"I bet you're great around campfires."

"You got your boys in blue to 'question' Penny St. Noire, but just as Godzilla and the Wolfman did with Benny, they got a little too rough. Then they tore the hell out of her apartment—mine too, for that matter—and still they couldn't locate what you wanted. Finally they found Dottie and did it wrong again. Stupid, Horne. Very stupid."

"Good help is so hard to find. Once you train a dog to attack, getting it to wear a muzzle is very, very difficult." Horne wrote Shayne's name on the check. "Give me a figure. I fill it in, you take it to the bank, and it's all over."

"I figure you'd cash me in before I could the check. But yeah, I've got a figure in mind, three of them, and they're all dead."

"Where did you find this information?" Horne said, his eyes

dropping on the paper still in the redhead's hand.

"At Penny St. Noire's Miami Beach apartment. If your pets looked at pictures other than in comic books, they might have noticed a painting with an impossible date, a date that had been altered, altered by Penny to help her remember something important."

"What? You're not saying the broad memorized everything Benny had?"

Shayne laughed. "The date was seven digits and turned out to be the phone number of a computer users group. Maples got Penny to call it up, stick the phone in a modem . . ."

"What kind of language you speaking?"

Shayne almost bit his tongue. "Get with it, Horne. This is a new age of high tech."

Horne scoffed, "That pimp had his whore use a computer—you've got to be putting me on."

"Her mother told me she had attended business school. Anyway, a friend of mine helped me talk to the computer, and guess what it told me." He shook the paper. "Everything I, the police, and the feds could ever want to know about the activities of Farrell Horne."

"What's to keep me from getting my attack dogs, as you call them, to rip up those sheets and you with them?"

"We're both smarter than that. You know, that's the nice thing about computers. By now the police have read their copy of your life history, and if I'm not wrong"—he glanced at his Seiko—"any moment now they should be putting in their guest appearance on *This Is Your Life, Farrell Horne.*"

The two tagmen came running through the front door. The blue suits started for their weapons.

"Hold it, you jerks," said Horne. "You've already got me in enough trouble."

Uniforms spilled through both the front and back doorways.

"Before you get wrapped up in the reading of your rights," said Shayne to the slowly paling bald man, "why don't you tell me what you did with Philip Jason?"

Horne looked at the detective blankly. "You may not believe this, Shayne, but I don't have the faintest idea who you are talking about."

XIV

SHAYNE PUNCHED THE BUTTONS ON THE FRENCH TELEPHONE that sat on the table in the Cornucopia. Watching a waiter carry by a silver tray laden with steak and lobster, the redhead wondered how long it would take Farrell Horne to adjust to Starke prison's four-star

swill.

"Sarge, this is Shayne," he said, flipping his notepad open. "I want you to run some numbers for me."

As the detective waited for the cop to call back, he took match to another Camel and stared at the dead alley. If Horne hadn't grabbed Jason/Pope, and since his former apartment guest wasn't working for the ex-mobster, what had happened? The blue suits, too stupid and too scared to lie, had just denied that they had tossed the redhead's apartment.

Then who had?

Shayne felt like a thirsty man in a desert. Every time he reached for the oasis, it turned out to be an illusion.

The notepad was his best chance.

Half an hour later the phone rang.

THE REDHEAD PARKED A BLOCK AWAY. THE IRON GATE was locked, so he hopped a wall. In the moonless night only a faint glow flickered behind a solitary window on the side of the house.

The same cars lined the driveway, the ones from his initial visit, the ones the MPD computer had earlier linked up with their owners. And the owners had one thing in common. He was glad his instinct had made him jot down the numbers Tuesday night.

This time he was positive Lillie St. Noire wasn't hosting a garden party.

The lock was nothing. Incense, stronger than before, greeted him, and in the distance low voices were murmuring something in unison. Memory led him down the darkened corridor toward the sound.

Carefully he tried the closed library doors. Locked. Light glimmered beneath them, and the muffled voices resounded more loudly. His eyes now accustomed to the darkness, he found another door down the corridor. The knob turned in his hand.

Sitting in a large chair, her back to him, Lillie St. Noire was clothed in black.

"The Queen of Witches, I presume," said the detective.

As she turned, she drew her cowl over her head. Her words came slowly out of the shadows it threw over her face. "Why, Mr. Shayne, after our little talk, it's hard to believe you take seriously the black arts."

Her voice, he noticed, had lost its matronly air. "Look, lady, all I believe in is three dead bodies, and I don't want the count to rise to four. Where is he?"

"Though promised to us last Monday, Richard Pope has finally

arrived."

So that was why Penny had drugged him, Shayne thought. "You know his real name."

"From the first moment he began to snoop around. You see, I've followed him since he was sixteen. When he started coming around this time, getting too close to the truth, I had to stop him."

Shayne's mind couldn't absorb the depravity. "You had his own sister unknowingly set him up to be killed?"

"Rather fitting, wouldn't you say?" she chuckled.

"Why would she do it?"

"For some months now she's been trying to break away from our group, a group to which she has belonged since becoming mine. I promised her freedom if she would do one last thing for me, but something went wrong."

"Why is it you don't seem as broken up at your daughter's death?"

"No matter how I tried to make the girl the astrological charts said would be my perfect daughter mine, it was not to be. Her parents' passing, the deaths that started my little group, was a waste."

Shayne concluded, "And with Richard Pope and me gone, nobody will ever learn the truth."

"Nobody. And now we don't even have to come after you."

Maybe it was the heavy incense, the dark, the long day, or maybe it was just because he didn't expect the old woman to move so quickly, but before he could react she pulled something from beneath the folds of her sleeve.

He felt the sharp pain as he jerked his hand back.

"Don't worry, Mr. Shayne. It's quite painless and works fast. It should keep you immobile until the appointed time."

The big detective staggered backward. "Are all the women in your group part of this?"

"All they know is that if they do what I tell them, they will have the power."

In his helpless daze Shayne saw the whole thing come together. All the license plates belonged to women, wealthy women, recently widowed women. He hadn't had time to check, but he'd have bet his last dollar all the women's wealthy husbands had died in accidents or under mysterious circumstances.

Her smile widened. "Constance now controls Miatech, Inc. Myra inherited her husband's real estate business. Anita took over her late husband and law partner's clients."

The detective's head swimming, he sank back against a wall and slipped to the rugless floor. "How . . . do you control them?"

"Why, Mr. Shayne, it must be . . . witchcraft."

A question bobbed to the surface of the detective's mind. "Why did you hire me if you were involved in all this?"

"When I was told Monday night that Penny was dead, it was quite apparent I had to create the illusion of the bereaved mother desperate to know her child's fate. Any suspicion could endanger the group. In your way you made my grief legitimate."

The redhead's anger was all that kept him from drowning in unconsciousness. "You mean you knew your daughter was already dead the night you came to the Fine Arts Center?"

"Haven't you heard—we witches know everything." Her smile abruptly ceased. "One thing I know for sure—in less than two hours you'll be dead."

Shayne never heard her prophecy.

XV

DISTANT CHANTING STIRRED THE DETECTIVE. HE CLIMBED out of a dark hole to find what resembled the library. A clock started thudding the time.

The redhead was lying beside the unmoving body of Richard Pope. Light flickered in Shayne's eyes as though the heavens had been lowered around him.

He struggled to raise his head. He was inside a five-pointed star that had been drawn on the hardwood floor. At each point stood a tripod filled with burning oil. The heavy odor of incense weighed upon him.

His legs were bound with leather thongs, and his wrists were lashed together behind him.

The man beside him moaned.

The chant grew louder. Shayne blinked his eyes. He was surrounded by figures garbed in dark robes.

As the clock ceased tolling at twelve, a voice spoke from behind a row of candles. "Sisters of the Night, the time is nigh. The preservation of our order demands the elimination of still more men. These two are intruders who would destroy us. I bid the initiate come forward."

A cowled figure moved toward the redhead. Shayne marvelled at how these women could have bought the witchcraft angle complete with all the trappings.

The voice the redhead recognized as belonging to Lillie St. Noire continued, "Are you prepared?"

"Yes," answered the cowled initiate.

"Face the sacrifices then."

Even before the woman standing in front of him removed her cowl,

Shayne had a suspicion who had been cast in the role of executioner.

The red hair cascaded on both sides of the face belonging to Laura Lee Horne, the only woman the detective had decided would have known Penny was dead on Monday Night. When he had seen the HORNE-2 limo pulling into the estate the day before, he knew he should have considered the possibility then that it belonged to the wife, not Farrell Horne.

Another woman stood beside Laura Lee Horne offering something on black velvet. The redhaired woman gripped it. The curved ritual blade caught the light of the burning cauldrons. Hesitation flickered in her eyes.

"It's not worth it, lady," said Shayne, interrupting the ceremony. "Your sisters won't have to return the favor. You see your husband's going to be taken care of courtesy of the state."

She dropped the knife to her side.

In that second the redhead reacted. He bent his bound legs and kicked out as hard as he could.

It caught her ankles. The knife dropped. She fell sideways against a cauldron. Some burning oil spilled on her robe.

The black cloth burst instantly into flames. She screamed, touching off a chorus of wails.

Someone reached out to help her, but the fire lept onto her robe.

The library was a chaos of movement and screeching. Disregarding the agony of the inflamed women, Shayne rolled over and grasped the knife. He started sawing furiously on the leather thongs.

Another body was ignited and the heat grew intense as the fire started spreading around the room.

The knife slipped from Shayne's sweaty fingers.

They were attacking Lillie St. Noire, who had locked the library.

The detective's fingers found the blade. Concentrating on the task, he cut through the leather in less than a minute, then severed that around his legs. Next he started unbinding Pope.

The library doors would not unlock.

The flames almost blistering his face, Shayne picked up an oak chair and hurled it toward the stained glass window.

It shattered. Throwing an unconscious Pope over his shoulder, the detective pushed through the crowd to the opening.

Shayne tossed Pope into the night and a large bush.

The last thing he saw as he catapulted himself through the glass shards was a tableau of Lillie St. Noire going up in flames beneath the burning painting of Joan of Arc.

"WITCHES," SAID LUCY. "HOW COULD ALL THOSE WOMEN buy black magic?"

Shayne sat down in the chair behind his desk. "I doubt they really did. Oh, maybe a few got caught up in it, but most of them saw it as a way simply to get what they want."

"I still can't believe what they were doing," said Tim Rourke.

"Why not?" said the detective. "You kill my husband, I'll kill yours, and we'll all get rich in the bargain. Listen, you old chauvinist, why should ruthlessness be reserved for the male of the species?"

"You couldn't save even one of them from that horrible fire?" said Lucy.

"In my condition, Angel, I was lucky to get out."

"Thank God," said Richard Pope, "you got me out. I guess I wasn't much help."

Shayne, finding it as difficult as ever to accept someone else's gratitude, turned to his secretary. "Lucy, you did make that call, didn't you?"

"Yes, Michael, and he promised that despite it being the middle of the night he'd be right over."

Holding a glass of rye in his hand, the *Daily News* reporter said, "Well, shamus, you'll finally have to admit that computers are good for something."

"Maybe. But I couldn't have worked it without you. I don't think I'm ready for the high tech world of the future quite yet."

"I don't know," said Rourke. "Tell me, how in hell did you figure out the password to access that users group computer?"

"A lucky guess," said the detective. "You once told me that 95% of all access codes are people's names. What better password for a woman who was breaking away from a group in her past than Joan?"

The door to the office opened. The smiling face of Marcus Pendleton dropped. "Damn it, Lucy, I thought you said this would be an intimate gathering."

"Nothing here but friends, pal," said Shayne.

"What do you want with me?"

"The answer to one question," said Shayne. "When did Horne first put you in his pocket?"

Pendleton bristled. "What in hell are you talking about?"

"Somebody had to tell Peckham to look the other way the night Horne's goons killed a woman at Seafoam. Didn't you blow off right here about how you were the man's superior?"

"That's circumstantial."

Shayne took out the matches and lit a Camel. Then he dangled the

matchbook in Pendleton's face. "Recognize this? You had one just like it that night of the Fine Arts Center opening."

"Hey, Shayne, not everybody who eats at that restaurant is in league with the owner."

"True, but not everybody who eats at that restaurant has his name on Benny Maples' list of Horne's operations. When Chief Gentry of the Metro Police saw your name printed out, he said I could have the honor of breaking the news."

"Why would you want to do that?"

"So I could also do this, pal." A month's worth of anger exploded against the capped-tooth face of Marcus Pendleton. He collapsed backward and spilled over a chair, his feet pointing straight up.

Like a photographer lining up a shot, Rourke framed the fallen figure with his hands. "How about we call this kinetic masterpiece 'Just Desserts'?"

"By the renowned Michaelangelo Shayne," added Lucy.

"Donate it to the Center for the Fine Arts," said the tired redhead.

FAMOUS SECRETARIES AND THEIR FAMOUS BOSSES

Secretaries' names are in the first column. Bosses' names are in the second column. See if you can match them up correctly!

- | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Velda | A. Sam Spade |
| 2. Della Street | B. Ellery Queen |
| 3. Nikki Porter | C. Mike Shayne |
| 4. Miss Moneypenny | D. Britt Reid |
| 5. Effie Perine | E. Mike Hammer |
| 6. Peggy Fair | F. Mr. District Attorney |
| 7. Lenore "Casey" Case | G. Perry Mason |
| 8. Lacey Brown | H. Joe Mannix |
| 9. Miss Miller | I. M (James Bond's boss) |
| 10. Lucy Hamilton | J. Eddie Capra |

ANSWERS

- | | | | |
|-----|-----|-----|------|
| 1-E | 2-G | 7-D | 6-H |
| 5-A | 3-B | 8-J | 10-C |
| | 4-I | | |

The patio lights blazed on, casting him in a glare as merciless as judgment. But he was already in motion, noting vaguely that a portion of the brick wall chipped and exploded. He plunged into the welcome shadow of an oak tree as something struck its trunk once, again, with a sound like snapping twigs. Then it occurred to him that the something was bullets. Someone was trying to kill him!

NIGHT WORK

by CARL HOFFMAN

RED MIKE WAS A BIG GUY, 6'1", 205 POUNDS, WITH orange hair that was too long for the 1980's and a pair of fierce green eyes overhung by startlingly dark brows. In the chill of this October night he waited in the shadow of the woods behind the mansions, shivering, watching.

In the dark. In the cold. As usual.

What the hell's taking so long?

Not that he should complain—there was a free show, provided he could stand to watch it. Window peeping always made him a little sick; it was degrading. But sure enough, upstairs in the house next to the target a woman was undressing. She had the shades up and the lights blazing, and obviously it had never occurred to her that a man could be watching from the backyard. Her innocence, or stupidity, or whatever you wanted to call it, enraged and enflamed him at the same time, and he watched greedily, hating himself. The binoculars put him in the room with her as she took off the dress, slipped out of the matching lingerie. It was October, but she'd kept her tan, caramel alternating with creamy white

where the bikini had been. Not a bad-looking piece, actually, not like some of the other dried-up biddies that lived around here. In her thirties, maybe, and nothing sagging. He thought of his apartment and wondered if she could stand a bed without satin sheets.

But suddenly he wanted to gag. So there she was, naked: what was he supposed to do now? Refusing to watch any longer, he wrenched the glasses back to the target.

Still no movement.

What's holding it up?

Of course he should be *grateful* for the chance at a score up here, because this suburb was the best in the city, probably in the state. A capitalist's wet dream, all right. The target house was typical, a Tudor monster three stories high, gabled and timbered, set behind a thick hedge on a street that wound past woods and ponds. The whole area was like that, a park full of mansions. Four miles down the hill women sold themselves on streetcorners and gangs fought like animals over lots covered with rubble. But up here they'd never heard of anything like that, up here even the air and sunlight were high class. At a rally fifteen years ago, in his radical incarnation, he'd said there were people who thought money could buy anything. He hadn't known then how true it really was, or how close you could actually *come* to buying anything you wanted.

Thinking of fifteen years ago made him mad.

What the hell's taking so long?

Then at last there was movement. Finally they were coming, emerging from the side door of the target house. He counted six—the banker, the banker's dumpy wife, their four guests—all laughing too loud from the pre-meal refreshments. Forty-five minutes late; it would have to be a quick dinner if they were going to make the playhouse on time, but probably they hadn't realized that yet. Life was tough on the heights, no joke. Through the glasses he watched the three couples walk to the silver Mercedes parked in the driveway. He paid special attention to one of the guests, a tall blonde in dark furs who stood waiting while her husband tried to get the door open. Even from here she looked terrific, sequined dress slit to midthigh, riding up over stockings that shone in the porchlight as she slid into the back seat. He could nearly whiff the Chanel No. 5. All six were in the car now; it started almost silently and swung out a little too wide, headlights sweeping through the brush where he crouched. Then it was gliding down the driveway, vanishing around a corner, silent as a dream.

A rich pig's dream.

HE TOOK A MINUTE TO SCAN THE LAYOUT ONCE MORE before commencing operations; Red Mike hadn't stayed out of jail for going on twelve years by being careless. There still was light downstairs in the kitchen, but he'd expected that. The alarms had been taken care of. Which meant everything should be okay. He slipped across the backyard, dodging from shadow to shadow.

Just for fun he tried the backdoor. But they'd locked it, of course, with the finest deadbolts money could buy. Leave it to the rich to take every precaution to safeguard their precious wealth. They'd locked the deadbolts and forgot about the bathroom window, which stood open just the way it was supposed to. He sawed a hole in the screen with his knife and boosted himself through, landing inside on a fluffy white rug. Light from the hallway shafted through the half-open door, revealing a crowd of Oriental knickknacks and paintings on the walls, probably souvenirs from the family's last trip to Hong Kong. Geishas bowed, Buddhas leered. He'd never been in a higher-class outhouse.

He stuck his nose out the door; nothing. Music was playing somewhere, probably a radio in the kitchen, but that was predictable too. He padded across the thick carpet to the stairway and climbed to the second floor. Up here it was dark, and he couldn't afford to turn on any lights, so he got out his pencil flash and probed along to the right, toward the master bedroom. The wallpaper was a textured velour pattern. He nudged open the last door and stepped inside.

Even in the weak light he could tell the bedroom was big, maybe the size of his whole two-room apartment, with a private bath and an acre or so of bed. But what he was looking for stood opposite the door: the tall bureau where the banker's wife kept her jewelry. He padded across and tried the third drawer, and there it was, a cream-colored lockbox. He shook it, and it clanked reassuringly. He tried to open it, but no soap. Carrying it to the corner away from the windows, he got out the knife for a try at the lock.

Then he heard an auto pull up outside.

A car door opened. A woman laughed, too loud.

To the window: it was the Mercedes, stopped and purring on the driveway. The banker with his silver hair and long coat was walking around toward the house. He must have forgot something.

The rich cretin.

Outside the woman laughed again, and Red Mike broke for the hallway, carrying the jewel box. But he hadn't made the bedroom door when he heard the front entrance screeling open and footsteps scraping on the slate entry hall.

"Back in a minute," called a man's voice. The chandelier on its long

chain above the stairway burst into light.

The banker was coming upstairs.

Red Mike knew he couldn't stay in the bedroom, so he scrambled across the hall, trying to keep the lockbox from rattling. He dove into an unlit room and stashed himself in the angle behind the door, panting. Between breaths he could hear the banker coming up the steps, humming a little to himself, still under the influence; the guy obviously didn't know there was anybody in the house, and with luck he wouldn't for a long time. Red Mike remembered shutting the bureau drawer, which meant the only sign of the break-in was the mangled screen. So as long as the banker stayed out of the downstairs bathroom, everything was A-1.

So get it, jackass. Get whatever the hell you came for and leave me alone.

The humming approached. Suddenly the light above Red Mike's head snapped on, bathing the room in an abrupt glare: desk, books, easy chair.

He stopped breathing.

Firm footsteps on the threshold inches away. A throat clearing, so the rank smell of gin was suddenly piercing Red Mike's nostrils. An overcoated shoulder appeared beyond the edge of the door, the back of a silver head. The banker stood over his desk, shifting papers.

Outside, the car horn sounded.

Red Mike stared at the banker's shoulderblade. Between blows of his pounding heart he cursed himself: *You stupid ignorant son of a bitch, you chose the office to hide in. The place he keeps his money. Of every room in this whole damn house, you chose this one.*

The horn sounded again, more impatiently. They were already late, probably just figuring it out.

"All right, all right," the banker muttered, and found what he was searching for. Still without looking around, he clutched the wallet and stowed it in his breast pocket.

Then he turned to leave, humming.

For a second he and Red Mike locked eyes; the humming stopped, and Red Mike could see the emotions on his face: dumb bliss followed by dumb shock, followed by dumb realization, followed by dumb anger—the whole parade of feelings that went through a drunk greedy bastard's head when he found one of the peons someplace where he wasn't supposed to be. The banker's mouth opened to shout, and Red Mike swung the jewel box, catching him on the side of the face, laying open the cheek so droplets of blood spattered the Brooks Brothers overcoat.

"Ah." The banker's yell came out choked, and he staggered sideways, lurching for the door. Red Mike hit him again, this time an overhand shot that smashed the back of his head and set him thumping face down on the threshold. Red Mike booted his silver head to make sure he stayed there.

On the driveway the horn beeped again.

Red Mike looked around. He'd won some time, but he still had to get out. A little longer and they'd come inside.

He could hardly breathe.

He stepped over the banker's unconscious body and into the hallway. It seemed to have stretched out while he wasn't looking, grown longer. A step. Another, his foot sinking in the thick carpet. He strained to hear the slamming car doors that meant they were coming. He had to make it to the downstairs bathroom at least before they got inside.

At last he reached the stairs. Nine steps down to the landing.

A pit.

What if he left the front door open? They don't even have to get out of the car. All they have to do is sit there laughing and they'll see me come down the stairs.

He could imagine the headlines: Red Mike caught after twelve years by a bunch of drunk capitalists. He wanted to cry. To cower.

beepBEEP

Can't stop now.

He summoned himself and started the descent. One. Two. Three—
beepbeepBEEP

Four. Five. He couldn't let himself think. Six.

BEEEEEEEP

Seven. Eight. Nine. Soles touched landing. The chandelier danced with refracted light. He didn't dare move. He felt as if his brain was floating out of his body.

Then he realized the horn had sounded muffled. The thought gave him enough courage to squat and peek down the stairs to check the front door. Closed. He let out a breath. He started down the last flight, keeping to the side to lower the odds of being spotted through the miniature window in the front entrance. Twelve steps this time. He'd made it to six when he heard the sounds he dreaded. The woman's laugh, louder. A man's voice. The car door, slamming.

Scuffling footsteps approaching the front door.

Red Mike jumped, plunging to the bottom of the steps, turning an ankle but ignoring the pain as he scrambled for the bathroom door. Suddenly he was surrounded by the geishas and Buddhas, but he ignored them too, boosting himself through the window. He could hear

the front door scraping open again as he dropped to the grass, pain flaring in his ankle. He took a swipe at the window, closing it partway before he began limping across the yard, headed for the trees that seemed half a mile away.

Voces behind him in the house, barely heard. Lights switching on. He limped in a nightmare, forever. He realized he was still holding the lockbox, and he struggled to muffle the sound of clanking jewels.

He was three steps into the woods when the screams began.

A squad car wailed past as he drove home.

A SAWTOOTH OF MOUNTAINS, VOLCANOES THAT COOKED and blew. Red Mike gunned full throttle for the horizon, watching the radar for enemy AFV. This was his last tank; he had to make it a good one. A pyramid in outline fell away to his right, a cube to his left; abruptly an alien tank registered on the scope and he pivoted wildly, trying to get his own gun around before the spacemen opened up on him. Adrenaline throbbed as he roared toward shelter behind a geometric outline, misjudged the distance, felt the vibes as he bounced off the obstacle once, again. He risked a full reverse, swinging left until the alien was in sight, a green insect scudding laterally. His mind became measuring, cool; he had to nail it quick before it started to turn. But everything happened too fast. The gunsights flashed green and he pumped off a long shot that missed, the projectile blasting wide, a fading green star. He powered forward; the enemy tank had halted now, swinging around to face him, OK Corral time. He stopped and sighted, determined to make this shot count. But his coordination was off. Again the sights glowed like neon and he pressed the trigger, but he hadn't stopped fully in the traverse, and the shell missed by an inch. Now the tables were turned; the enemy fired, and he watched transfixed for a moment as the shell arced toward him. He snapped out of it, slammed the controls and skidded right. The shell missed by a whisker, but no cover was close. Then the panic hit; suddenly he was fleeing for survival, roaring toward the foothills, feeling the alien radar sheening his vehicle, dreading the next shot from the enemy's piece. He didn't even see when it came; abruptly his tank's motion ceased and the viewing window cracked in jagged shards. "Damn!"

GAME OVER, the screen flashed; volcanoes blasted on the horizon, and the triumphant enemy tank loomed huge as a rhino in his broken gunsights.

"Finished playing around?"

He jerked away from the eyepiece of the video game; it was Chantal, of course, his partner in crime, showing up for the meet, late as usual,

and he was ready to snap her head off. One, because he felt bad in general, two, for fouling up last night, not keeping the banker driving toward the restaurant whether he had his wallet or not. But she was standing there in her short fur jacket and lavender designer slacks, doing her best haughty icequeen, and he knew if he exploded at her she'd just blow him some frost and walk away. And he wasn't ready for them to stop dealing yet. So he put on the bluecollar wiseguy: "I ain't got a Rolls like rich folks, so I gotta get my kicks for a quarter."

She eyed him, the only grown woman in the whole arcade, while all around the games spongred and bleeped.

"I didn't have to come here." Her voice always gave him a thrill, low and throaty, like a fingernail scratching down his spine. "I've got a lot to do. We're having friends Monday evening."

"But Saks closed at six. And anyway, you were too broke up over what happened to your banker pal to decide whether you wanted Chivas or Johnnie Walker Red for the cocktails."

"The man's in a coma, for God's sake. I was with his wife all afternoon. You could have a little decency."

Suddenly cautious of her mouth, Red Mike looked around the arcade. But none of the kids had noticed. They were all zapping away at monsters and spaceblobs. Fantasyland. "Let's go for a stroll."

She jerked her head in disgust, as if he'd asked her to do something obscene. But she followed anyhow as he walked out of the arcade, into the mall. Twenty yards ahead, at the hub where the shopping wings crossed, copper pipes in a concrete pool threw spindly jets of water maybe six feet into the air. Not exactly the fountains of Versailles, but enough to keep the peasants happy; they swarmed past by the hundred, housewives with their bawling kids, teenagers in school jackets. They'd never heard the word recession. Seeing them, and aware of the merchandise stacked high on the shelves and the thousands of dollars changing hands, Red Mike felt an old despair; the United States marketing system ate everything you put in front of it. No wonder the Movement died in '72.

But Chantal and her capitalist old man and all their fat friends lived on and on.

He took it out on her: "Feeling a little strange here, maybe a little plebeian?"

"Will you get off it?"

"This is how the other half lives, babe. The great proletarian masses. Where's your car?"

"We aren't going anywhere."

"No. But we sure as hell need a private place to talk."

He held the glass exit door for her; she shrugged again in the same disgusted way and walked out, raking him with those bruised purple eyes. He knew it was only a trick of make-up, Revlon magic, but they moved him more than her voice. All the time he'd been watching her on that driveway last night, waiting for her to get into the car in her slit skirt and sable fur, he'd been thinking of those purple eyes.

HE FOLLOWED HER INTO THE VAST PARKING LOT, PAST shoppers charging in for a crack at the goods, down an endless parking lane. Her Jaguar stood in the shade of a landscape hedge, but there was enough light from the silver overheads for him to read the license plate: N CHANT. Enchant, or In Chantal? He liked the second possibility better.

He slid into the genuine leather seat. "Got the coke?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You said you'd bring coke tonight."

"That was before this happened."

"Before what happened?"

"You know."

"Look babe, it was nothing special. Nothing out of the ordinary."

"Beating a man half to death isn't special?"

"This is the planet Earth. Besides, since when did you get morals? You're the one who wanted the jewels."

"You make me sick."

"Admit you love the pain." He grinned.

She wouldn't look at him.

"I've got some weed." He pulled one of the reefers from his pocket, lit it with a match, toked a big one. He held it out to Chantal, but she continued to ignore him. "Don't be nasty, babe. We're in this together."

"Not any longer we aren't."

"That," he inhaled, and talked while trying to hold the smoke in his lungs, "that's where you're wrong."

He realized he sounded squeaky as a mouse: Red Mickey. He chuckled to himself, discovering the potency of the grass, but she still didn't answer. She just stared through the windshield. He admired her profile.

"It's like this," he said, impressed by the mellow reasonableness of his voice. "I ain't got the bread to leave town. I ain't had a decent score for the last month."

"You have KayKay's jewels."

"Yeah, and who's gonna fence 'em, after what happened to the

banker? They couldn't be hotter if they were fresh out of Mt. St. Helens. For all the bread they're worth, I might as well have picked rocks off the beach."

She continued staring out the window.

"Only one solution to the problem," Red Mike told her, sucking on the jay. "Another score." He choked, giggling, and coughed resinous clouds of smoke, coughing again and again, laughing the whole time. The bruised eyes slid around and watched him, cool and superior. Under other circumstances he might have smacked her, but just now it only made him laugh more.

Finally he stopped coughing.

"So rob somebody else," she said. "Beat somebody else's brains out. I don't care."

He smiled, amused by her disdain. She was one of the people who didn't have to practice; she'd been born sneering. Aristotle said aristocrats shouldn't be allowed to hold office because they were overprivileged pigs who couldn't relate to anything but their own pleasure. He grinned and told her: "Not good enough, Chantal. Not even close. You gotta help me with the score."

"Dream on."

Her tone reminded him of a schoolgirl, and he couldn't resist coming back at her like a know-it-all teacher.

"Sarcasm gets you nowhere, babe, and for once neither does your green stuff. Let's examine the facts. Hot blonde from the heights, you, is cruising bars one night while her husband's out of town on business. Who does this sultry piece pick up but a fantastic lover, me, who'll indulge her every whim in or out of the sack—"

"Don't flatter yourself."

"I've had better than you, too." He realized his hand was on her thigh; she watched it with the same contempt she had that first night. He offered her the joint again, and this time she took it, as if it was her due. She inhaled deeply as he went on. "She makes him rent a fancy hotel room and spends the hours until four writhing with inflamed passion."

"Pig." She exhaled potsmoke.

"Just what I was thinking about you, babe." He tossed it off casually. His hand was moving now, but she didn't respond. "The hot blonde is so turned on she spills that the one thing she's always wanted is the necklace owned by a so-called woman friend named KayKay who she's really hated for years. Seems she has to suck up to KayKay because KayKay's husband's a banker, and the banker's important to the hot blonde's husband. Hearing the word jewels, the fantastic lover

pricks up his ears. Jewels are one thing he knows a little about."

"Creep," But now she was sighing. Her eyes were shut, blonde head leaning back on the genuine leather headrest. His hand widened its circuit, casing the territory, seeking flesh. She shifted, breathing deep.

He continued: "So they set up a score on the friend's house. The hot blonde leaves a bathroom window open and kayoed the alarm system. The fantastic lover goes inside and gets the jewels, but there's a little trouble because the blonde didn't keep the banker from coming back when he shouldn't. Exit the banker. Exit the fantastic lover with a boxful of jewels he can't lay off because the blonde fouled up. So the fantastic lover plays the only stunt he's got left. If the hot blonde doesn't help him with another score, he's gonna call up her husband and tell him all about the way she helped in the burglary."

"Animal," she moaned.

"I got something for you, Chantal. You want it?"

"What." She didn't open her eyes. She was still leaning back on the seat, lips slightly parted, breathing hard.

"Take a look." From his pocket he drew the twenty-four perfectly-matched diamonds on their silver chain and dangled them in front of her. "You want it? It's KayKay's."

"Give it to me," she breathed, though she didn't reach for the necklace.

His hand was still moving. There was a pause, then the faint tearing of cloth. "What do I get in return? You gonna help me?"

"Yes."

"I mean it, babe. You gonna help me?"

"Give it to me."

"I'll let you touch it." Wrapping it around his fingers, he caressed her cheek. Those bruised purple eyes. "You're gonna help me, right?"

"Right."

"One more score and I'm out of your life. But you gotta help me out."

"Yes." Her head was sliding off the headrest now, down onto the seat. Red Mike sank too, on top of her.

"When I leave, you get the necklace." His voice was a breath, almost inaudible.

"Yes. Sure."

"You're a smart kid, Chantal. Even if you were born spoiled."

"Yeah."

Red Mike was hot now too. He hated himself for it, but he bit her mouth, kissed her purple eyes.

SUNDAY NOON RED MIKE STOOD IN A PHONEBOOTH downtown, choking on the stink of old vomit. He folded back the door, gulping fresh air, and said, "You're going too fast. Try it again."

Chantal's husky voice was barely audible across the bleeps and static of the phone connection: "Are you deaf? Honestly, I've already told you—"

"Tell me again. I want to make sure I've got it." Actually, he wanted to keep her on the line, wanted to listen to her voice some more, because something was wrong, something didn't click. A semi roared past, sunlight glinting off the cab. He swung shut the door. "The address is 254 South Park—"

"Two four five. Two forty-five." She was playing the ice queen again. "For God's sake."

"Okay, two four five, and the guy's got his desk in the study on the east side of the house near the swimming pool—"

"Right. Right. You're finally getting it."

"How do you know these people?"

"How do I know anybody? Edward's an attorney who works for my husband's friends."

"You've gone out with them?"

"Of course. We've had drinks a few times. Nothing special. Because if you think I can afford to have two of my close friends burglarized in the same weekend you're—"

"Okay, I get your line of reasoning. Even your husband might start looking at you funny, and we couldn't have that, could we, I mean, your marriage's in tough enough shape as it is."

She didn't answer.

Red Mike went on: "I mean, what would poor little Chantal be without all that money. Lost and lonely, that's what."

She still didn't say anything, and for a second Red Mike was afraid he'd pushed her too far. He switched tactics: "So these two are on vacation, that's what you're telling me?"

After a moment she spoke. "In San Diego for the week. They're due back tomorrow morning, which is why they're so ideal for you. When you trip the alarm you can just call the security company and tell them you're Edward and you've come back a day early but you lost the alarm key in California so you weren't able to turn it off."

"I'm not sure I like that," Red Mike snapped. "How do you know there isn't a codeword?"

"I don't," Chantal snapped back, the snotty schoolgirl again. "You're just going to have to take the chance."

"I get caught, you know who's going down with me."

"How can I forget."

"So there's no codeword."

"No. No codeword."

"Gilmore Security."

"That's right. Call them when you get inside. That's the best I can do at short notice. You didn't give me very long with this one, you know."

He said nothing, holding the receiver against his ear. He could hear voices, faraway conversations. Other worlds.

"Are you listening?" Chantal asked.

"Sure." He hung up the phone, folded back the door, stepped into the thin sunshine, trying to shake off his sense of unease. Traffic roared past; across the street a gang of black boys in their early teens was hanging out at the base of a Civil War statuary group depicting a heroic band of Union soldiers, probably charging into the teeth of Confederate guns. The boys were passing a bottle wrapped in a paper bag. Beyond them, the ramparts of the Criminal Justice Center reared toward a polluted sky.

He walked up the street, toward the Esplanade and his car, thinking things over.

He couldn't kid himself: something was wrong.

Chantal was jerking him around, and he had to figure out what to do about it. She had to be playing with him because, first, this lay-out was just too damn easy. Walk in and take the stuff, Mikey, they won't know you've been there till they get back tomorrow. After Friday at the banker's, he'd expected her to fight him every inch. No more quick pickings courtesy of *this* piece. But it wasn't like that, it was just here's the place, knock it off. It made him think, think even harder because on the other hand, it was too tough. Chantal could probably secure one or two K with a phone call. No need to go to the trouble and risk of setting up another score for her favorite B-and-E man if it was just a question of bread. The jewels belonging to the banker's wife were different, she'd be willing to take a chance for the thrill of laying hands on those. But money was something else. She'd been wasting it since the first time she whined to her old man for a toy she didn't really want. With a history like that, the logical course would be to give him a present and wave bye-bye. But she wasn't doing it, she was doing whatever he said. Which meant there was something back of it, maybe even a set-up.

So: he had to make a choice, and soon. This afternoon at the latest.

Except there really *wasn't* a choice. His current stash totaled fifty bucks and change, maybe enough for food this week, forget about the

rent due week after next. He needed a score. No other way.

HIS CAR WAS PARKED ACROSS FROM THE MAIN LIBRARY. He started it, picked his route, burrowed out of the downtown area through a valley of smokestacks that changed to workmen's bungalows, neighborhood grocery stores. He felt a tug of sympathy: he wasn't the only one with no bread. The crowd at the mall last night was just camouflage; here the streets reeked of lay-offs, killing time, dead hours at the tavern. Depression flashback. John Dillinger, here we come. He speeded up, the music on the radio feeding his mood, church organs giving way to folk, guitars and banjos twanging, reedy voices wailing about hard work and vanished lovers. In 1969, his last year above ground, he'd lived with a folk singer named Cynthia whose red hair fell below her waist. She had tiny white hands dotted with freckles and played Joan Baez records while they made love, the red hair spilling across the pillows. She cried when he told her he'd have to leave because the cops were coming, and he was usually moved when he remembered it, moved enough to forget that Cynthia was so neurotic she had trouble crossing the street by herself. He grinned: eleven years dodging cops had taught him the uses and limitations of nostalgia.

He was approaching the heights now, climbing a winding ravine. The city lay behind him in grayish haze.

A definite accomplishment, those eleven years, considering that the FBI had him on the Most Wanted list for the first two, after which old J. Edgar gave up and took him off it, meaning the feds didn't figure on capturing him anytime soon. On the other hand, he couldn't say he'd done much good. For the past eight years he'd robbed to live, forget the revolutionary action. The last time he made contact with his old sidekick Bardol, they'd consoled each other that every day at large was another victory for the *people* and the *Revolution*. Maybe Bardol even believed it; he'd never been noted for his gray matter. Anybody in contact with reality knew the *Revolution* had been moribund for going on a decade, while the *people* were breathing the haze in the rearview mirror, drugging themselves with beer and hoping there'd be enough of a recovery next year for them to get their old jobs back.

He was on South Park now, purring between hushed mansions. Two forty-five stood serene across a lawn shadowed by oak trees, a rambling heap at least a half-block long, with a gently-sloped roof and phony Ionic columns alongside the front door. It looked deserted, all right.

He pulled into the park down the street, stopped the car and switched off the engine, hearing kids shouting far away. It occurred to him that if he forgot the whole thing—Chantal, the score, the whole bit—and

gave himself up, he could settle down and write a book. *My Years on the Run: Red Mike Tells All.* Autograph parties at bookstores, interviews on TV, the proven American way for a revolutionary to come out of hiding. The problem was his pride, his ability to recall the smirk that came across Chantal's face when she thought she'd put it over on somebody, another easy win for the girl who always got her way. It would be awhile before he gave her, or anyone like her, the satisfaction, and right now he was going to charge on through, Chantal or no Chantal.

He climbed out of the car, strolled through the park in the direction of the target, glancing at it casually now and again. Charging on through didn't mean he had to be stupid. The place still looked deserted, though he noted that it was more isolated than he'd first thought, hidden from its neighbors by a bend in the road and the screen of oaks. A stone wall maybe four feet high bordered the grounds, and on the east side he spotted the swimming pool, covered by a tarp for season, near a patio door. She hadn't been lying about that, anyhow. Locating a park bench with a good view, he sat down to wait, folk guitars playing in his head, twanging. Keep your lamps trimmed and burning.

After an hour and a half he began to comprehend the popularity of earphone-radios, but he continued to wait, occasionally getting up to stretch his legs or play with one of the mutts that wandered past. It was turning cold.

They arrived just before sunset, just before he'd made up his mind that paranoia had manufactured the whole scenario. There were two of them, one blond, the other dark, but otherwise identical in their thick bodies and long arms, the plaid hunting jackets they wore. In the striped athletic bags they each carried. Two men walking nonchalantly, as if out on an evening hike. With no car, nothing to give a clue where they might come from. They keyed the front door and disappeared into 245 South Park, and the mansion lay as placid as before, yielding no hint that anybody was inside. Red Mike decided a change of venue was indicated. He wanted a safe place to watch and see if they came out again.

TWO HOURS LATER IT WAS FULL DARK AND THEY hadn't left; they hadn't even turned on any lights. Red Mike knew he should drop the score and forget about Chantal, but he couldn't avoid the thought that perhaps the men had gone out by the back door and he'd missed them somehow. He was reminded of the time he found a snake slithering across the floor of his basement apartment; he'd

known immediately what it was, but he still had to look three times to convince himself it was really there. He determined it was time for some window peeping.

He moved the car so it was around the bend, out of sight of the target. He climbed the low wall and circled the house in the shadow of the trees, speculating that the men were probably in rooms in back. They might even have switched on lights invisible from his other post. But as he approached across the lawn he could see that this side was as dark as the front, and when he slipped into the shadow of the wall he might have been bellying up to a tomb, a derelict.

Emptiness. Silence. Desertion.

Again his brain signalled him to leave, but then he remembered the fifty and change. He tiptoed to the patio doors. The wind stirred the treetops, sending a chill through him. He crouched, figuring that if he stayed close to the ground he'd be less likely spotted. Holding his breath, he peeked into the darkened room. At first he could see nothing but blackness and a spattering of glowing red and blue lights like early Christmas decorations. But he remained motionless, not breathing, and gradually his eyes adjusted. A shining orange insect looped through the darkness near the light display and paused, glowing brighter, motionless, illuminating a curve of jawline. It took Red Mike a moment to comprehend that the orange insect was the end of a cigarette.

So he wasn't the only one who was waiting.

He could make out some details now. A hand moved across the light display. On a shelf nearby was a dark object that might have been a gun. The cigarette glowed again. Red Mike's attention went to the spatter of red and blue; a red pinpoint throbbed on, off, on. He puzzled over the lightboard's meaning. A stereo? A radio? The red spot continued its monotonous pulsing, and then it hit him.

Alarm controls.

He'd tripped the alarm by crossing the stone wall!

AS IF HIS THOUGHTS HAD TRIGGERED THEM, THE PATIO
lights burst on, blazing, casting him in a glare as merciless as judgment. But he was already in motion, noting vaguely as he turned that a portion of the brick wall chipped and exploded, but ignoring it, dodging around the corner and back the way he had come, over the lawn, plunging into the welcome shadow of an oak as something struck its trunk once, again, with a sound like snapping twigs. Legs flailing, it occurred to him that the something was bullets, that someone was trying to kill him, though he'd heard no shots, seen no gunman. He

skipped to the side, rushing into denser shadow, and now he heard a single shout behind him, another bullet clipping through branches to his right, farther away as the marksman lost him in the shade. He strained for the sounds of pursuit as he vaulted the wall, tripped and went tumbling, but there was no sound but his own breath coming in long tearing gasps. He sprang to his feet, churning on; he could see the house next door now, looming ahead, first floor aglow with cheerful light, and on the street beyond it his silent car, parked under a tree.

He ducked behind an oak on the neighboring lawn, peeked around it. Nothing in sight but the shadowed lawn and the patio bathed in its empty glare. He searched for a silhouette, anything to give him a clue of what they were doing to locate him. An auto cruised past on South Park, its motor a startling roar in the stillness. He realized that except for the one shout they had come after him in total silence, the final proof, as if he needed any, that Chantal had set him up. You didn't advertise it if you were trying to murder somebody.

Murder. The word rushed upon him. He felt his shoulders start to quiver. But he forced them to remain still.

Angry with himself, he clawed in a pocket for his keys; he still had to make it to the car. He located them, found with trembling hands the one that would unlock the door and start the engine. Took another look toward 245 South Park.

Where are they? What's going on?

Maybe they wouldn't follow him for fear of tipping off the people next door. It seemed possible, anyway.

Then what are they going to do?

He looked around. Maybe they were sneaking up on him. The shadows seemed to crawl as another gust of wind stirred the treetops. He shot a look at his auto in the darkness by the curb. He clutched the key tighter. *What if it doesn't start? What if they've wired it to blow up?*

He tried to calm himself. He was getting panicky. That was paranoia talking; they couldn't have wired the car. He'd have seen them. He forced himself not to think. Keys in hand, he crouched and stole across the lawn, dodging from treetrunk to treetrunk, avoiding the light from the house and the streetlamps.

But why hadn't they come after him?

Who cares? They handed me a break. Just get out of here.

He was behind some shrubs now, a few feet from the curb and his car, marshalling his nerve to sneak up and open the door, when he saw the van. It appeared from the garage of 245 South Park, noiseless, lightless, sliding down the driveway as silent as a nightmare. Painted

black, and coming to get him.

Him.

He lost sight of it momentarily as it disappeared behind the house, and he hoped against hope it would turn in the opposite direction. But a moment later it reappeared, rounding the bend on South Park still without headlights, moving slowly, almost casually, coming closer with every thundering beat of his heart. Maybe they had infrared devices inside it, maybe they could see in the dark. He cringed behind the shrubs.

The van was abreast of him now, slowing to pull up next to where his car was parked. A flashlight came on in the passenger's side of the van, beamed down into his car. Red Mike glimpsed a jacketed arm, part of a shoulder. The light moved leisurely over the back seat, the steering wheel. It hovered on the dashboard, then seemed to waver, as if trying to make up its mind to extend the search. Almost reluctantly the beam swept the shrubs and Red Mike ducked, hiding his face, unable to watch any longer. Breathing dirt, he waited for the sound of the van's doors opening, the sound of footsteps on pavement. The sound of death.

But it didn't come. Instead he heard the van crunch into gear, its engine surge as it speeded up, and suddenly it was moving away, headlights coming on, a cigarette butt bursting like a firecracker in its wake.

He watched it out of sight, watched it curving around the next bend in South Park. The taillights flickered behind some bushes, then disappeared.

Gone.

He lay there listening to his heart gradually slow its hammering. Five minutes, six. But even then he could barely muster the courage to walk the twenty feet to his car. To unlock the door, climb in, start the engine. To grasp the wheel with shaking hands and pull away, not switching on the headlights but steering a tight U-turn so he wouldn't be chasing the van.

Every second he watched the rearview mirror. Every second his biceps quivered. But every second put him farther away from 245 South Park, from the trap that had been laid for him, and every second replaced his fear with a throbbing uncontrollable rage. He was Red Mike, twelve years on the run, and he had two stops left to make before he blew this stinking town. First his apartment, to pick up his gear. And then the appointment that really counted, the one he knew he had to keep, the one to square the books. He had to force himself not to pound the dashboard when he thought of her, thought of her exquisite

face exploding in blood.
Chantal.

BREAKING IN WAS EASY, EASIER THAN HE HAD ANY right to expect, easier than it should ever have been for a house so large and valuable. The serene arrogance of the rich. He stepped across a windowsill and padded through a labyrinth of darkened rooms and hallways, guided by the high-pitched keening of a television. He found her in the rec room, nude and asleep on a knitted afghan spread across an ankle-deep Persian rug. The TV test pattern cast her naked skin a cold silver; the shadows flickered over her thighs, across her shoulders. Clothes were scattered on the floor; and a pair of glasses and a half-empty bottle of wine stood near the fireplace.

He couldn't have stage-managed a better set-up. She was lying on her side, mouth open, head on a pillow. Arms flung out, close together. Her body tense, as if she was trying to escape something. Finding a nylon stocking on the carpet, he looped it gently around her wrists, knotted it tight. She stirred but didn't wake up, and he could see her eyeballs rolling madly beneath her lids. Troubled sleep. She quieted, and he gazed down at her, feeling the fury writhe inside him. She didn't seem nearly as beautiful in this cold pulsing light, her skin specter-pale, her make-up smeared. How he could ever have slept with her.

He nudged her awake. The eyes snapped open, staring up into his, the eyes that had seduced him, the eyes of a spoiled child, now blank, uncomprehending. Stupid.

"So how goes it, hotstuff. Been having a good time tonight?" Chantal tried to run, but he grabbed and held her. She tried to scream, but he shoved a corner of the afghan in her mouth. She tried to fight, but her hands wouldn't move, bound by the stocking.

"How's that? All comfy-cozy? Anything else I can get you?" She lay there motionless, the eyes brimming with terror. "Husband's out of town, isn't he? So how come there's *two* glasses by the fireplace?"

She cringed, and he took out the knife. It was a switchblade, five inches long, and it flicked out of the handle in a little silver flash, curved and slender and wicked. Gently, almost lovingly, he wrapped a lock of her hair around his fingers and sliced it off with the knife.

"I saw a movie once," he said softly, feeling the rage coil inside him, tightening, "about the liberation of France. You know what they say: the day after the Normandy invasion 20 million frogs joined the

Resistance. In this particular flick they were proving what heroes they were by shaving the hair off women who'd slept with German soldiers. Turned my stomach both ways. One, that anybody'd sleep with a Nazi. Two, that a crowd of bootlicking cowards could muster the chutzpah to shave their heads."

He was slowly shredding the pillow with the knife. Cut, cut, cut. Chantal squirmed her head away.

"On the other hand," he continued, "when I start considering some of the stuff that's happened lately, I can see that if you let your emotions run away, you can get in the hair-slicing mood pretty easily. Matter of fact, the way I see it now, those women were lucky they didn't have their guts torn out."

With abrupt violence he slashed the afghan, ripped off handfuls of tangled yarn, threw them at her. Chantal hid her face. Then Red Mike ceased the bombardment, the fury ebbing for a moment, and when he spoke again his voice was cool, measured:

I've got to hand it to you, Chantal. You're a real education. For the last twelve years I've been figuring out what an idealistic jerk I was in college. But I didn't realize I was a total A-1 till I met you. Sable furs. Satin sheets. All you do is suck it in like a black hole, and everybody lets you get away with it. You can turn any political system ever invented into garbage just by putting on your slit skirt. You even had me suckered."

Her eyes were squeezed shut. He leaned closer.

"Open your eyes, Chantal." His voice was a hiss, his mouth inches from her ear. "Take a look at the guy you wanted to kill."

She obeyed, so close that the bruised purple eyes melted into one.

"Who owns that house?" he breathed. "You know the one."

She twisted her face away.

"Two forty-five South Park," he said. "Tell me who owns it. Maybe the Mafia?"

He'd pulled the corner of the afghan from her mouth, and her lips moved a couple times. Breaths and ragged sobs came out; nothing else. He realized she couldn't answer his question. It didn't matter, really, Mafia or not, freelancers or not. Whoever. Some friend of a friend of Chantal's was willing to do her a favor by murdering somebody, remote control of course, no need for her to do anything but make a phone call. The way the world worked; she only had to ask around. One of wealth's many perks.

He said: "It amazes me how it all fits together. Power attracts power. Everything interlocks."

She only wept, her face turned away.

Then suddenly he was roaring, "YOU LOUSY DOUBLEDEALING BITCH," and she tensed rigid, cowering, waiting for the knife's downward plunge, the ripping of her naked flesh. He almost laughed.

HIS WORK DONE AT LAST, HIS TWELVE YEARS OF RUNNING almost finished, Red Mike drove fast through the night, up the Parkway, onto the Beltline, which was empty as a desert now, three hours after midnight. The shadows marched through the cockpit of his car one after another, the city falling away to left and right, stores and factories and houses lying surreal under the orange lamps that washed their sides. A multitude of the deaf and blind. Sparking red, a jetliner swept low over the highway, a mechanical insect. The horizon was splashed by a neon borealis, fired by the blaze of a burning building. Dark trucks crawled around the flames like giant caterpillars.

Arson, probably. He didn't stop.

He'd had enough. He was bound for Canada. The war—if you could call it that, if you could say it wasn't really just a twelve-year skirmish in which he and people like him had worn themselves out trying to chisel down the Rock of Gibraltar—the war was over. He had fifty and change and a car, and he considered himself lucky. Some friends lived in Toronto. Maybe they would get him a job for old times' sake; maybe they would find him a place to live. Maybe, depending on how they felt, maybe they wouldn't turn him in to the RCMP. But he was heading for Canada; four hours to Buffalo, and he'd stop at Niagara Falls in the morning. He already felt like he'd been over them in a barrel, and a little sightseeing was the appropriate technique for starting the new regime. He grinned to himself.

He was only dimly aware that a new vehicle was roaring up the onramp of the deserted highway. Seeing it with his peripheral vision, he gave way automatically, switching lanes, not noticing that the newcomer was a dark van with two men up front, not noticing that the man on the passenger side was rolling down the window, resting a shotgun on the frame, levelling it at Red Mike as the van pulled abreast of his speeding car.

If Red Mike had known how hard the two men in the van had worked to make this rendezvous, he might actually have admired them. If he had known how patiently they had stalked him after placing the magnetic radio direction-finding device on his car while he crouched behind the shrubs on the lawn next to 245 South Park, how they had cautiously paralleled his route through the city and never given him the opportunity to see them until this exact moment when the set-up was perfect, he might have taken a second to appreciate their skill. But he

was aware of none of that, was, indeed, barely aware of their presence at all.

Then the man with the shotgun triggered his piece, shattering Red Mike's windshield and blowing away most of the side of his head. The last thing Red Mike saw as his car careened toward the ditch was an orange city standing on its head, spinning crazily above a garishly-lit sky. The van halted and the man got out and ran to Red Mike's overturned car, ready to finish him off with a pistol. But finding that it was unnecessary, that he was already dead, the man jogged back to the van, which drove away.

CHANTAL'S HUSBAND RETURNED FROM HIS BUSINESS trip on Monday evening, upset that she had not met him at the airport. When he found that her Jaguar was still in the garage, he was positively infuriated. But when he walked into the rec room, he was shocked. Taped to the TV screen was a long note from someone who signed himself Red Mike. On a ripped-up afghan on the floor was his wife, bound hand and foot, her frightened eyes bruised purple. And between her breasts, rising and falling as she sobbed, was a necklace of twenty-four perfectly-matched diamonds, twinkling, twinkling in the dancing light.

MYSTERY MINIQUIZ

How many eggs can a peacock lay in a lifetime?

Hopefully, none. It's the peahen that lays the eggs!

Between 1935 and 1949 a dozen movies were made featuring a jewel thief named Michael Lanyard. Under what name is this character better known?

Played by actors Melvyn Douglas, Gerald Mohr, and Ron Randell, he was better known as William, Gerald Mohr, and Ron Randell, he was better known as Warren William, Gerald Mohr, and Ron Randell, he was better known as The Lone Wolf.

Who was Asta?

The dog belonging to Nick and Nora Charles.

They could not go on this way, as adversaries. Life drew itself down to winners and losers; it held few draws and ties. Harcourt was determined to be the winner—at any cost!

Digger

by STEWART STREET

THE INSTANT HAROURTE DROVE INTO THE CUL-DE-SAC called Roundhill Circle, he began to feel uneasy. It was nothing he could lay a finger on. All he could say was that he just felt changed. Or that *things* were about to change again. And for the worse.

He parked the Volvo in the upsweep of driveway next to his wife's country station wagon. He plucked his briefcase from the seat beside him and as he did, he was aware that he was scarcely breathing. And his palms were wringing wet. He knew who was doing this to him, who was putting him through this torment and anxiety.

Digger was doing it to him.

He mounted the front steps with the sensation that a butterfly was trapped inside his chest. The evening newspaper was still there on the porch, rolled up like a white sausage. Cassie usually collected it the instant it arrived, which was habitually around three-thirty, to clip the food coupons before Harcourt confiscated it for the remainder of the evening. And here it was five-thirty. It was merely another omen that something wasn't right.

There was no one in the living room. Charlie Harcourt shrugged out of his coat and put down his briefcase and the newspaper. He walked through an empty dining room whose table was only partially set for dinner. In the kitchen he found his wife standing across the gulf of terrazzo tile, her back to the room. She was looking out the sliding glass doors, where the backyard was falling dark under a September dusk.

Her voice, when it came, was as tense as taut wire and as cold as death. "Charlie, Digger's back."

"Cassandra, don't kid around."

"I'm not kidding. Come and see for yourself."

Harcourt went across the kitchen and came to his wife's side in front of the glass.

"Look out past the patio," she told him. "About ten feet down the flagstone."

The autumn darkness was falling with the swiftness of a nearly discernible act. Charlie Harcourt hit a light switch on the wall behind the parted drapes and the patio became illuminated in floodlight. Thin, intersecting cones of light shot out into the yard and down the stone walkway, which bisected a vegetable garden on the left and a green expanse of lawn on the right.

"There, Charlie. On the left."

Harcourt's heart sank when he saw it, the neatly sculpted mound of earth that was Digger's trademark, identical to all the others in height and circumference, architectural symmetry that was as exact as a snowflake's.

"Charlie, he'll devastate the whole yard again. He'll dig those tunnels of his back and forth all night long, night after night, until the whole thing will cave in under foot."

But that was Digger's talent, the thing he was born to do. He was nature's most efficient, inexorable subterranean backhoe, a constantly digging dervish. Plowing through underground earth was the only way a mole could get at the insects it fed upon to stay alive. Harcourt knew all this, knew and accepted that both nature and man had their separate paths to travel. So long as those paths did not collide. The way they were colliding now. And *had been* colliding these past eight months. When man and nature met in a confrontation like that, only one path would survive, only one prevail.

HE FELT HIS WIFE LEAVE HIS SIDE AND A MOMENT LATER, he heard her putting something into the microwave and fiddling with the settings. Harcourt remained at the glass, staring out at the tiny hill of dirt, growing indistinct now as the sun made its final dive behind the foothills. He lit a cigaret and saw the pulsing red star of its tip reflected in the glass. He wondered if Digger was bold enough to plow tunnels under the house. Harcourt wouldn't put it past him. He was bold and clever and evasive and yes, even perverse.

"Dinner will be just a few minutes," he heard his wife say behind him. "Baked beans and franks. Do you want me to open you a cold

beer?"

He didn't answer her. Instead, he got a sauce pan down from a cabinet and flashlight from a drawer and went out into the patio. With the sun nearly down, the wind was beginning to build and sharpen. It nipped at his ears with enough bite to say it was the advance guard of winter's worst. The past two winters had been mild. They were due for a bad one.

He found the garden trowel in an empty flower pot where he'd left it five weeks earlier. That was how long Digger had been gone and he'd checked the grounds and the vegetable garden every night. In that time there hadn't been a single molehill, not one. It was funny, but Harcourt saw this first hill as Digger's cruel calling card; an icy, formal reintroduction. Just to tell them he was back.

The final ten paces to the molehill were spotlighted by his flashlight. When Harcourt reached the hill, he dropped to his knees and laid the flashlight down so that it trapped the hill in an oval beam. Then, he carefully troweled the mound of dirt into the sauce pan down to the original level of the ground. Twenty-six and one-half grams. That's what the debris of Digger's tunnel entrance would weigh. That's what it had *always* weighed. How many times had they brought out the kitchen food scales? Twenty? Fifty? A hundred? One of their neighbors had told them they could determine the number of moles they were dealing with by measuring and weighing the mounds. So they measured and weighed. Each time, the hill's circumference and diameter at its base was the same. Each time, it weighed twenty-six and one-half grams exactly.

"Looks like you only got one critter, Charlie," Ed Thibadeux had concluded. "I've heard they travel in packs. In families. You know, like rats."

"A mole is a mammal, Ed, not a rodent," Harcourt had objected.

"Mammal, rodent. They still herd up. What you appear to have on your hands, old man, is a maverick. Some kind of loner male who does all his marauding by himself."

Harcourt kept on measuring the mounds and weighing them carefully, but the results were always the same. And he inquired not only of Ed Thibadeux, but of his eleven other neighbors in the ring of split-levels on Roundhill Circle, whether they were experiencing mole problems. There wasn't a solitary molehill among them.

BEFORE RETURNING TO THE HOUSE, HAROURTE MADE A careful tour of the back yard. He searched the perimeters of the chain fencing, along the flower beds, the broad expanse of lawn and the

vegetable garden, where only sparse patches of broccoli and winter squash still flourished, and then back along the entire length of flagstone walkway. He found only the single mound. Likely, Digger was preoccupied with necessities: getting his telephone hooked up and his utilities reconnected and removing the dust covers from his furniture.

Back in the kitchen, Harcourte set the scales on the table in the breakfast nook and placed the sauce pan of dark, rich earth atop it, reminding himself to subtract the customary seven grams for the weight of the pan.

His wife was well-accustomed to the ritual. From another area of the kitchen, she said, "Thirty-three and one-half grams, am I right? Seven for the pan and twenty-six and one-half for Digger?"

"As if you need to ask."

"God, next thing you know he'll be under the house, undermining the foundation. One night, while we're ever so comfy and asleep in our bed, the whole damn house will drop right out of sight!"

Harcourte wanted to reassure her about such things as the solidity of concrete, but he was bushed from a grinding day at work and set on edge now with Digger's sudden return. And so he said nothing, merely sat in the dimness of the breakfast nook and waited for the beans and franks to heat.

They ate sullenly and with animation, like bad actors in a play whose setting was a kitchen. But both of them could feel the presence of an uninvited and unwanted third party, burrowing beyond the glass.

"Digger," said his wife at last, her little laugh valiant and a bit self-chiding. "God, we've even *named* him. Given him a personna. Like some crazy uncle we have to keep outside at night."

"We'll get him," Harcourte told her.

"Oh, *no we won't*, Charlie. When we're dead and in our graves and our children have followed us to *their* graves, Digger will still be out there, as safe and happy as a clam six miles under the sand. He'll still be submarining his way back and forth out there with a big, fat grin plastered across his face, like the most happy fella taking a stroll through the park!"

"We'll just have to be more persistent," Harcourte said. "More ingenious."

"When they were handing out ingenuity, Digger was at the front of the line and he took more than his share. Look what he's done to our lovely vegetable garden. He's eaten the roots of everything out there. And he eats cabbage by the head and tomatoes like he's Italian. And don't try to tell me all that carnage was done by slugs, because we've

never had a problem with those. And, besides, I always thought moles were insectivorous to a fault."

"Well, it looks as though Digger has developed a wider appetite."

"I half expect him to come up to a kitchen window and order take out."

HARCOURTE COULDN'T FINISH HIS MEAL. HE PUSHED HIS plate away and sipped distractedly at the dregs of his coffee. They'd tried every conceivable assault to destroy the mole. They'd flooded his tunnels with gallons of water, they'd gas bombed, they'd tried gasoline and even ignited it, they'd even attached a vacuum cleaner hose to the exhaust pipe of the country wagon and gassed Digger's tunnels with carbon monoxide. But nothing worked. He was as resilient as the ages and as resourceful as the world's most renown escape artist.

At parties and neighborhood barbecues, it seemed all Harcourt did was badger his friends for solutions to his mole problem. Acetylene torches, electrocution, Drano, pitchforking, ground glass, crank case sludge. One of his neighbors even told Harcourt of some success a brother-in-law was having with unchewed chewing gum. It mixed with moisture in their digestive tracts and over time did them in. But he never tried that. He imagined what sort of raving fool he would look like to his neighbors, down there on all fours unwrapping sticks of chewing gum.

"More coffee, Charlie?"

"What?"

"I said do you want more coffee? There's a little bit left in the pot."

"I'm sorry, Cassie. A little more, yes."

She sat down with him and they took turns glancing out at the darkened yard where Digger was plowing unseen towards whatever were a mole's purposes when the sun went down.

"You're still thinking it's some kind of conspiracy, aren't you?" his wife said. "A vendetta for that business that happened to you out in California when you were a boy."

"You mean about Digger being a descendent of that mole I killed on my grandfather's farm? No, that was just a momentary aberration of mine. Animals aren't capable of passing on information like that. Why do you suppose we use the phrase 'just a dumb animal'?"

HE HAD BEEN EIGHT YEARS OLD. HIS PARENTS HAD dropped him off his grandfather's farm in Santa Ana for a week's stay while they indulged themselves in a second honeymoon.

His widower grandfather had been a big-bellied retired Navy chief

with a modest ranch-style house and small groves of walnut and orange trees.

He also had moles, lots of them. His crude, homemade traps scarcely made any dent in their population. His moles had acquired the knack of springing his grandfather's contraptions and then scampering through them unscathed. Charlie could remember being in bed in an upstairs room and listening to the old man cursing out his moles in the moonlight while he drank whiskey and fired shotgun blasts into their mounds.

One afternoon, Charlie was out behind the house, near the root cellar. He had been hitting rocks into an open field with an old baseball bat and munching on walnuts.

He had been stooping to grab up a fresh rock when the mole popped from under ground less than two feet from his nose. The mole seemed startled at suddenly confronting a human being at such point-blank range. It froze on the spot, falling back on its hind legs, with its tiny, fossorial forefeet poised in the air. Its small eyes shone like dark rosary beads catching sunlight, and the little boy began to quiver with fright.

When Charlie swung the baseball bat at him, he brought it down in a low, vicious arc. It impacted the mole on the side of its head and blood flew from its nostrils and mouth in a fine spray the way it does when a dog shakes water from its head after a swim. The mole toppled over on its side and tried to rise, but Charlie struck it again. With the third blow, it lay still breathing its last few fitful breaths. For a horrible minute, Charlie watched as the mole convulsed in the throes of its death. And then the reflexive little twitches stopped and he lay dead.

They buried the mole near one of his grandfather's compost heaps. Charlie was praised for his courage and for his composure and accuracy in the face of such a threat. Only he hadn't felt threatened in the least. After all, he'd had the baseball bat and the little mole had been no bigger than a housecat and pitifully defenseless. It had been a hollow victory.

"IT WAS A VARMINT, CHARLIE," HE HEARD HIS WIFE'S voice say now, jerking him back into the present. "A little nuisance who could move a hundred times his own weight in earth in a single evening. A useless varmint who tears hell out of the land while it eats a few insects. I don't call that trade-off that's at all beneficial to man."

"I clubbed it to death," said Charlie Harcourt, his eyes becoming moist with guilt.

"You *killed* it," his wife said, firmly. "With the only weapon you had at hand, a baseball bat. You got rid of a farm pest. It's as simple as

that."

"Maybe you're right."

"No *maybe* about it, Charlie. *I am* right. If you hadn't killed it, your grandfather would have got it with bait, or gas, or a shell from a shotgun."

An uneasy peacefulness settled into Harcourté, one as fragile as a soap bubble. His wife was utterly right. To feel so much guilt over the death of a varmint was unnatural. And yet still within him was a tiny corner of feeling that said what he'd done had been wrong and immoral.

"Charlie," Cassie said now in a low voice, on filled with deadly seriousness, "Digger is beginning to run our *lives*. And beginning to ruin them, too. It's insane and illogical to let a common garden mole take on so much importance. Let him *have* his piece of ground. Let him chug around down there in his little subterranean network. Let him think he's menacing us and causing us sleepless nights. When he finally dies from a cave-in or from old age, we'll send his relatives a sympathy card."

She was right, of course. It made no sense to fashion a nightmare out of this by their own hands. Digger was simply Digger: a nearly mindless garden pest, a brainless backhoer, a minor irritant in their lives that, in time, would dig off for richer ground or succumb to age.

They passed the remainder of the early evening in separate pursuits. His wife ensconced herself in her sewing room, doing whatever women did to hems and bodices on clothing to make them wearable or stylish. Harcourté read his neglected evening newspaper in the breakfast nook, sipping scotch with ice. He brought himself abreast of national events first and then moved on to the sports and the upcoming World Series. He made himself a second scotch, cutting back a little on the ice, and checked out the cumulative statistics of the local college football conference. Thoughts of Digger had been virtually swept from his mind.

It must have been around ten-thirty when his wife poked her head into the kitchen to say she was going to bed. When she spied the scotch glass on the table, she issued Harcourté a temperance frown, but said nothing about it.

"Keep snuggys," Harcourté told her. "It's going to get chilly tonight."

"You coming soon?"

"In a little bit," he told her. "I want to finish the paper. And think a little."

"Not about Digger, I hope."

"Farthest thing from my mind," he said, knowing that statement to be a blatant lie, an *obsessive* lie, and hoping she would not catch him in it.

"Good," she breezed. "See you in a little."

"In a little," he said back and blew her a kiss off his palm.

HARCOURTE SLOSHED A THIRD SCOTCH INTO HIS GLASS and went out into the patio. The floodlights shone on a slowly materializing ground fog, a delicate, protective mist that looked like a barrier above Digger's private territory. It belonged to Harcourt no longer. He could have lawn parties and quiet picnics and suppers on the patio; but he would always feel like an invader or an alien on his own land, like some lawless wanderer who used facilities while the family was away.

They could not go on this way as adversaries. Life drew itself down to winners and losers; it held few draws and ties. And while Digger survived and escaped, he celebrated by digging a fresh escape route and Harcourt's nose was being rubbed in the dirt.

A dark purpose began to stir inside him now. For weeks now, it had been held out as a final option. It was a thing for which he was totally schooled and prepared, a calculated risk he was holding in abeyance until Digger drove him to the final ditch.

He poured out a fourth scotch. The unadulterated alcohol both warmed and numbed his brain, but had not fogged it to the point where he couldn't function. The alcohol served to give him just enough nerve to do it without taking his wits from him.

In the quiet evening, Harcourt made his way back through the house and out to his car. He went around to the trunk, opened it and carefully peeled back a layer of tarpaulin. There, in a shallow cardboard box, lovely and deadly, was everything he needed.

The dynamite, the blasting caps, the wiring, the detonator.

He had had to fill out a mountain of forms for the dynamite in accordance with state and federal law, inasmuch as so many humans were tempted to use it to kill each other. But when he revealed that he intended to blast tree stumps, the clerk drew him a meticulous diagram on how to lay the charges properly to do the job without blowing him to Kingdom Come in the process.

— HE WAS AT IT FOR NEARLY TWO HOURS, WORKING CAREFULLY from his diagrams illuminated by flashlight, laying the charges over the entire expanse of lawn and gardens, sinking each stick of dynamite forty-six inches deep and aslant with a posthole digger. He

painstakingly refilled each hole with its original earth, packing it deep and hard. He came upon no new mounds so he knew Digger was not abroad somewhere in the night, but down there beneath ground, entombed and unaware of his impending death.

Harcourte ran with wiring back up to the patio, then across it and into the kitchen. He knew the killing range of that much dynamite and he wanted to make deadly sure he was well out of it.

Almost prone on the kitchen floor, he attached the wires to their terminals. What an apt term for them. Terminals. To terminate. *Terminus ad quem*, he whispered beneath his breath as Digger's fitting eulogy. The finishing point.

Carefully he cranked the detonator to its firing position and rechecked his connections. Then he took up his grip again on the detonator's handle, closed his eyes softly, tried to make himself a part of the mosaic pattern in the kitchen tile and gave the crank one, sudden twist.

THE EXPLOSIONS WERE BOTH HEARD AND FELT ALL OVER Roundhill Circle. Adults shot bolt upright in their beds and children woke up screaming from sleep. Windows blew out and dogs howled in fear and dishes flew from kitchen cupboards like so much light-weight bric-a-brac hurled by an angry giant.

One of those who came awake immediately was Ed Thibadeux. He stumbled from bed and jammed on some trousers as his wife sat with her back against the headboard in utter shock, her eyes trying to make some sense of what was going on.

Thibadeux went quickly across the upstairs hall and checked on his children. They were whimpering and shaken, but looked to be all right. Thibadeux hugged them both and told them to stay put and stay in bed.

When he returned to his own room, his wife was already up and dressed in her robe and slippers.

"Ed, what the *hell* . . . "

"Explosion of some kind," Thibadeux said. "Sounded like it could have come from Charlie Harcourte's place."

Their house was just across the circle from Harcourte's. Thibadeux went to the front window of the long bedroom. Bright, flickering light came from the rear of the house across the street, and a cloud of black smoke rose into the clear sky.

"The Harcourte place is on fire," he told his wife. "It's a bad one."

"Do you see Charlie and Cassie?" his wife asked.

"No, I don't see them anywhere. Good God, they're still inside."

"Do you think anyone's called the fire department?"

"Probably everyone's called them," said Thibadeux, "but let's not take any chances."

Quickly, Ed Thibadeux came back across the bedroom, picked up the phone receiver on the nightstand and punched off 911.

In ten minutes, Roundhill Circle was teeming with fire trucks, police patrol units, ambulances and medical aid cars. The entire neighborhood seemed to be there in front of the house as concerned spectators, milling about and talking to each other in small groups.

Shortly, Ed and Barbara Thibadeux, too, rushed out into the suburban night to join their neighbors' vigil in front of the Harcourte's house, as talk bristled among them.

"I heard it was gas. Natural gas. All these tracts have the feeder lines running down the service alleys and through the rear of the property."

"The fire's out."

"Yeah, but it isn't the fire that kills people, it's the smoke."

"Are Charlie and Cassandra still *in there*?"

"The firemen haven't found them yet."

"Dear God."

Barbara Thibadeux had her arm around her husband's waist, snuggling up against him to keep warm. When she saw the paramedics appear at the side of the house bearing two stretchers, she gasped and put her free hand over her mouth in horror. Neither Charlie nor Cassie was conscious or moving. The medics must have applied emergency CPR at the rear of the house where nearly all of the damage had been done, but to no avail. It didn't look good for them.

The two stretchers were secured in the rear of the Medic One unit with great urgency and then it was screaming off into the night in its race with death to Brierwood General Hospital. The crowd seemed reluctant to disperse, as if some importance or aid could be attached to their staying a little longer.

"Come on, Barb," Ed Thibadeux said to his wife now, in a quiet tone. "There isn't anything we can do here. Let's go home."

"We should call Brierwood General to find out how they are, Ed."

"No one will be able to tell us anything this soon. We'll call in the morning."

The woman nodded in reluctant agreement and then the two of them padded back across Roundhill Circle to their own home, Barbara Thibadeux's nose beginning to run a bit now from all the acrid smoke still lingering in the air.

AT THE REAR OF THE HARCOURTE HOUSE, IT WAS NOW only a mop-up action. Firemen had doused all the small spot fires and

an emergency crew from the natural gas company had shut off the feeder line. Hose was being untangled and collected, and exhausted firemen were sprawled everywhere, all their energies spent on what had been a very nasty situation.

The yard looked like the aftermath of a battlefield. Deep craters were everywhere and smoke and ground fog intermingled with piles of charred, smoldering debris.

Standing in the midst of the smoke and ruin, Assistant Battalion Chief Paddleford used a handkerchief to wipe soot and perspiration from his face and tried to make some plausible sense of what had happened here. Some damn fool had set off some dynamite charges in the backyard, that much was evident. An intricate network of simultaneous charges had gone off, which in turn had ruptured a natural gas feeder line. The gas explosion had brought on the subsequent house fire.

Likely, the charges had been laid and triggered by the male resident. He had been found inside the house by some of his men, fully clothed. The female had been discovered in her nightgown, blown against a far wall of the rear bedroom.

He didn't expect either resident would survive.

It was all pretty bizarre, Paddleford had to conclude. But his investigators would have it all sorted out in time. His job was to extinguish fires and save lives, not to ponder motives or reasons or evidential significance.

Paddleford was very close now to issuing his order to repair from the scene. He would give his men another ten minutes for any contingencies. For the moment, something he'd seen on the ground had captured his attention scarcely ten feet from where he now stood. It appeared to be a nodule of freshly dug earth rising above the level of the ground. He walked over to the mound to better confirm his suspicions and the sight of it suddenly brought a wry chuckle to his throat. It was the damnedest thing he'd ever seen! Amid all the havoc and carnage and pure devastation, a single garden mole had survived the nearly complete destruction of his burrows.

And now, mindless of how close he had come to seeing his own mortality, the little devil was simply hiking up his socks and rolling up his sleeves to begin the tedious work of rebuilding. ●

He was a determined man, a collector of the hard-to-get, and not even a priest was going to stand in his way when he wanted something

Poison

by ISAK ROMUN

THE CONDITIONS OF MY UPBRINGING TAUGHT ME THERE is a special hell reserved for those who steal from a priest. But that was when I was young. Nowadays the priest had better batten down the hatches just like the rest of us.

Case in point: Father Paul J. Bax who, a few years back, was pastor of St. Francis Xavier Church here in Paulsburg.

He was short, round, and in appearance disconcertingly innocent. It was an innocence that hid a hard and realistic assessment of the world about him. In his sermons he could be aphoristic and would, without warning, push upon you little moralities that had the gloss of antiquity but were, on examination, of contemporary cast or immediate invention.

He would say, "Materialists and madmen never have doubts."

That I identified as Chesterton.

He would say, "It is preoccupation with possession, more than anything else, that prevents men from living freely and nobly."

That I identified as Bertrand Russell.

He would say, "You may own a thing of gold, but the form of it and all the images induced by that form belong to all."

That I identified, in time, as pure Bax.

In this last case he had to be referring to the monstrance.

It was an incredible object of solid gold. Its base was fixed with gems and inscribed in Latin with selections from Proverbs. Its column was cunningly shaped in the figures of Adam and Eve in attitudes of pre-ophidian innocence. They were gazing upward to the surmounting sunburst at the center of which, circled by small rubies, was the lunette.

The monstrance was the loving work of some remote cleric in the California missions and dated from the period of settlement and proselytization following the Spanish conquest. It was a gift to the Spanish king for use in his private chapel. The monstrance was put on one of those treasure ships which were the natural prey of English freebooters. The ship was sunk, but not before its treasure, monstrance included, was carefully transferred to the ship of its new owners. The monstrance went from land to land and hand to hand. It ended up the possession of a well-to-do admirer of Father Bax who gave it to the little priest in appreciation of some spiritual assistance.

I LEARNED OF THE MONSTRANCE JUST BY CHANCE AS I chatted with Father Bax outside his church one Sunday. The priest had ended his participation in the service within before the finish of the closing hymn. It was one of those new church songs, wispy and vapid, diluting divinity, making God seem avuncular and banal, like the white-haired neighbor next door—who has his faults.

We discussed the music and from that began talking of the near-demise of the Benediction ceremony, once a fixture of a parish's final Mass on Sunday. This, logically, led to mention of monstrances, which figure prominently at Benediction. In order, the conversation turned on *the* monstrance. On learning a little of its history, I was anxious to see it. Father Bax said, surely, and after his community duties with his parishioners, crowding out of the church at the music's end, led me to the rectory.

He showed me into the building's sitting room and there, prominently and recklessly displayed on a cabinet, was the monstrance, exquisite, redolent of the glories of yesterday awash in the anonymities of today. These last included the room and its furnishings. It was a mean, dark, little room that had a boxlike quality about it, its hard edges cutting lifeless space into definition. The furniture was ponderous and undistinguished, all chance of even an accidental felicity missing. The monstrance, though, on its cup-stained cabinet transformed all.

I asked a question, which I don't recall now, and that question led to others, none of which I recall either, but which provided the details I have recorded earlier in this account.

It was another story I was after back then. I was a newspaperman and smelled something newsworthy, three columns wide with dignified but informative head, photo with artifact and priest, and, best of all, by-line. Mine.

That story appeared the following Sunday in the "Living Today"

section of the paper I worked for, *The Paulsburg Advance-Indicator*.

AND, NOW, ENTER NERO KNARR.

Nero Knarr was the sort of person who evoked thoughts of epitaphs. His. He was a rich man in that period of life when the natural acquisitiveness of business was subsumed in the unnatural acquisitiveness of the collector of self-indulging and costly objects. What he wanted he bought or, failing this, took.

In a way, I'm to blame. It was my story in the paper that attracted Knarr to the monstrance. I found out about this interest when I received a call from Father Bax.

"Oscar," the priest asked, "do you know a Mr. Knarr?"

"Know him, no. Know of him, yes. One of Paulsburg's, excuse the expression, luminaries. Very winning, very persuasive, very much up front with his bucks. He wants to see the monstrance, doesn't he?"

"Yes. Yes, he does. Though he was very casual in his mention of it. How did you know?"

"It figures. He's a collector of the hard-to-get. He must have read my story. And he contacted you to see it. 'See' is not exactly a precise word in this context."

"What exactly is a precise word, Oscar?"

"Buy. Steal. Take. You make your choice."

The priest didn't respond and I began to wonder if we had been disconnected. Then he said, "He'll be here tonight at nine. Perhaps you'd like to drop over?"

"May be interesting. All right."

DUTIFULLY AT NINE I WAS THERE. SO WAS KNARR.

"Monahan, isn't it?" he said in a voice that told me he didn't care one way or the other. "I read your article."

"Monahan it is. And I know." We didn't shake hands.

We were in the rectory vestibule, admitted within a minute of each other by Mrs. Danneway, the housekeeper, a woman with great dignity and a marcel wig. She was off searching for Father Bax.

While waiting we said nothing more than those introductory remarks. I was sizing him up and I suppose he was doing the same to me.

He was a small, gray, waspish type, dressed carefully in dark blue with a thin, almost imperceptible, gray stripe. He was probably pushing seventy or had pushed it. He carried those years well not because of robust health—I had heard he had problems in this department—but because he would not permit himself to carry them any other way.

Father Bax came along. Knarr and I stopped our examination of each other and I witnessed a transformation that I was tempted, considering the surroundings, to call miraculous. Knarr gushed over the priest. Told him of reading my story and how he *must* meet the remarkable Father Bax, apologized for not getting around to meeting him sooner. He knew all the clergymen in town and they *knew* him, particularly when a roof needed patching or an aisle wanted carpeting. At this, a trace of a snicker escaped Knarr and his eyebrows went up meaningfully. I half expected him to nudge Father Bax with an elbow, but Knarr brought himself up just short of this.

As it was, Knarr couldn't seem to keep his hands off the priest. From the time he wrung Father Bax's rough, pudgy hand in his soft, claw-like one, he was never out of contact with the priest. He touched him on the arm, tapped a finger against the priest's chest to make a point, and, as they walked toward the sitting room, wrapped an arm around Father Bax's shoulders.

I trailed after them. At the doorway, Father Bax went in first. Knarr followed, but Father Bax did not turn on the light. In the half-light of the room, the priest gestured toward the monstrance, still hidden in a darker recess, untouched by the light from the vestibule. Knarr's eyes were fixed on the point Father Bax indicated. With Knarr's attention directed this way, Father Bax then, and only then, flicked on the overhead.

It was dramatic, and I had never suspected Father Bax of any flair or talent for the dramatic.

The priest had not been taken in by Knarr's display of good-fellowship. Father Bax now let the lineaments of a special knowledge appear on his face. I, who also was not fooled by Knarr, enjoyed immensely the spectacle played out in that dingy room.

The flat, black-and-white newspaper photo had not prepared Knarr for the reality of the monstrance. Having it pressed upon him like that, with the light suddenly on, robbed him of control. He stood there and gaped. His mouth opened and his eyes bulged as if with some exophthalmic disorder. His face went ashen, became dampish, and his hand shook as it went into a coat pocket, I thought for a handkerchief.

When Knarr's hand, still shaking, came out of the pocket it held, not a handkerchief, but a small, clear medicine bottle. Inside, I could see pills. He groped his way to a chair and, in it, concentrated on opening the bottle. He wasn't having much luck, his quivering hands couldn't manipulate the screw lid. Father Bax took the bottle from him, opened it, and shook two or three pills into a palm.

"One?" he asked briskly.

Knarr nodded feebly and Father Bax handed him a pill. Knarr popped it into his sagging mouth and put his head back against the chair.

I watched Father Bax. A look of remorse crossed his face. He fed the extra pills back into the bottle, replaced the screw lid, and returned the bottle to Knarr's coat pocket.

"Heart?" Father Bax asked.

Knarr nodded again.

"I'm sorry for that," said the priest, glancing up at the light.

Knarr waved a limp hand indicating it didn't matter. Then, the medication taking hold, he sat up in the chair and fastened his eyes on the monstrance. He said four words.

It was Father Bax's turn to be shocked. He eased himself slowly into another chair and looked at Knarr; not into his eyes, for Knarr was still looking at the artifact, savoring it, all but licking his lips in anticipation of owning it. Father Bax gazed at Knarr's profile and I think he was as struck by it as I was. It was sharp, angular, beaked, like a bird's.

The amount Knarr said in those four words represented a lot of money; not what the monstrance was worth, but a reasonable starting figure.

"No, Mr. Knarr, no."

Knarr said some more words. The figure climbed.

"It wouldn't be suitable. It was a gift."

More words. More money.

Father Bax let out a long sigh and said, "I feel as if I am on a high elevation and you are offering me the world."

Knarr misunderstood and moved in for the kill. "Then the deal is in?"

I had an image of swooping, fluttering wings, of Father Bax throwing his arms clumsily before his face. "No. Can't you see? I can't sell a gift!"

Then Knarr pulled his eyes away from the monstrance and bore them into those of the priest. He talked to Father Bax in a low, intense voice. The words came out of him like burbling lava—heated, deceptively effervescent, destructive. He made bald threats, such as calling in the note one of his banks held on the new religious education building, such as harassing his employees who were Francis Xavier parishioners, such as—no need to go on.

To all of it, Father Bax turned a calm and patient face. At its end, he pulled himself to his feet. He walked to the door and called Mrs. Dannaway. When she came, Father Bax asked her to show Mr. Knarr out.

Knarr got up and moved quickly to the doorway. There, he said, "I'll have it, Bax, I'll have it. You'll see."

"We stood in silence after Knarr left. Finally, Father Bax spoke. "I believe he will have it, Oscar. What do you think?"

"That was a lot of money," I said, unhelpfully.

PAULSBURG STARTED OUT AS A TRADING POST IN THE sixteenth century graduating to a village in the seventeenth and a town in the eighteenth. At the beginning of the nineteenth century it was incorporated as a city.

Nonetheless, Paulsburg never outgrew its humble beginnings. It's less like the medium-sized city it's supposed to be than it is an overgrown town. This is evident in its twisting streets, some of its old laws which retain varying shades of blue, even in the inescapable local orientation of the *Advance-Indicator*. And, of course, in the Wednesday Closing.

In a small town the Wednesday Closing is workable, but in a city it's anachronistic. Briefly, what it amounts to is this: at noon sharp, nearly everything closes down; stores, schools, banks, showrooms. Even churches.

To Father Bax who, by his calling, was addicted to ritual, Wednesday was ritual—in its larger aspects, though details might differ. And to the other people resident in the rectory, the associate pastor and Mrs. Danneway, Wednesday was also ritual. The younger priest visited his mother in Weaver's Lee, the housekeeper her sister in the capital.

Father Bax's Wednesday was tiresomely routine. In the afternoon, he would leave the rectory struggling under the bulk and weight of several large packages. In the packages were old, clean, usable clothes which Father Bax, employing mendicant skills that all old-time priests seem to possess, had plucked from the closets of the parish. He would dump the packages into his car and drive over to Duckpuddle Road, close to the edge of Paulsburg, where there was a United Parcel Service pickup point.

With the packages in the hands of UPS, destined to go out that day to some central relief headquarters which would further distribute the clothing items to missions around the world, Father Bax's time was his own.

Usually, there was time before dark for a ramble through the nearby Civil War battlefield. After that, when sunset overtook him, he sought out one of Paulsburg's restaurants for supper, then visited a parish family or individual.

IT WAS MY TURN TO BE VISITED THAT WEDNESDAY NIGHT and Father Bax hustled across my doorstep aglow for some reason which I took to be the acquisition of a new bit of Civil War lore..

So, after he called in his whereabouts to an answering service, I asked, "What makes you so happy?"

Instead of responding, he asked me, "Did you get the impression the other night that Mr. Knarr might do something desperate to get his hands on the monstrance?"

"I guess I picked up the same thing from Knarr that you did. His threats didn't faze you, so he may set somebody to steal it. Did you lock up the rectory?"

"I'm not sure. I often forget to."

"I don't suppose it matters. If someone wants to get in, they'll get in. I can't say much for the general security of the place."

He smiled pointedly. "The monstrance will never be taken from me, Oscar. I have placed it in a location from which Nero Knarr himself cannot steal it."

"Where is this wonderful place?"

"It doesn't matter." Then Father Bax changed the subject. "Let me tell you what I found at the battlefield today."

He did. And I, a low-powered Civil War buff myself, found the hours slipping away as we talked of the blue and the gray, of the vestigial encampments around Paulsburg, ghosts of their nineteenth century realities. We were discussing the Union railroad that ran through the area when the phone rang. I looked at my watch. It was close to midnight and I wondered who'd be calling. I had been off news beat for years and didn't get late calls anymore.

Father Bax was seated nearer the phone than I, and I signaled him to answer it. He picked up the instrument, held the receiver to his ear for some moments, said, "I'll be there in minutes," then silently, carefully replaced the instrument in its cradle.

"Well?" I prodded.

"Nero Knarr is dead."

"Who was that? Who called?"

"The police."

"Why would they call you?"

"Apparently, Mr. Knarr died in the rectory. Mrs. Danneway found him—the body—when she got back tonight."

ALL OF US, AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER, COME UP against a tendency we should reject. Those of us who don't reject it are failed human beings. Nero Knarr was a failed human being.

He had been stealing all his life, though in a remote, my-hands-are-clean manner, using manipulative agencies, such as banks and board rooms. He was so successful at this type of stealing, I suppose he thought it high time to graduate to greater directness. Though why he would elect not to have someone do his dirty work is a secret Knarr carried to wherever it is he ended up.

There could be no question of it. He had forced his way into the rectory. He was dressed in a parody of the fictional second-story man: dark clothes, black cap pulled down to just above the eyes, and sneakers. There was a bag of tools of fine quality and specialized design. Money can find anything.

Well, almost anything. Money didn't get the monstrance for Knarr and Father Bax was right, it couldn't be stolen either. It wasn't in its usual place in the sitting room. And, clearly, it wasn't anyplace where Knarr could get his hands on it. He tried. The place was a wreck. Knarr had used his tools inexpertly, but effectively. Nonetheless, he didn't find what he was looking for.

That's what killed him. The excitement of searching, the crushing tightness of failure.

The body, rictal shock upon the face, was found at the foot of a stairway, the pill bottle in the hands. One hand was holding it, the fingers of the other were on the seated screw lid.

An *Advance-Indicator* reporter was there so I didn't do anything about getting the story down on paper. I hung close to Father Bax, however, dying to ask a question or two.

He saw through me. "Tomorrow, Oscar," he told me. "Questions and answers tomorrow. If I have the answers tomorrow."

FATHER BAX CALLED ME THE NEXT NIGHT. "COME over," he invited.

I noticed as I was let into the rectory by Mrs. Danneway that a lot of work had been done toward cleaning up the mess of the previous night.

Father Bax and I went into the sitting room. I looked at the top of the cabinet and, in my mind, visualized the monstrance there. Then I wondered why it wasn't. I kept my mouth shut, though, and waited for Father Bax to lead. He didn't seem ready to talk just then, so I glanced around the room. Everything was the same except for a package on a corner table. I gestured toward it, and broke the silence.

"For United Parcel?"

He appeared startled, coming out of a daydream. He looked at the package, nodded his head.

"One you should have taken yesterday?"

"One I should have taken the day before yesterday."

More silence and then he said, "All right, Oscar, we both know the monstrance wasn't stolen. Do you know why?"

"No."

"Do you wonder why I didn't talk to you last night?"

I thought back and realized that through the trial of finding out what Knarr had done, of assessing the damage to the rectory, of comforting Mrs. Danneway, of dealing with the police, Father Bax had been calm, in control of himself. But there was something else, some expression of puzzlement in his face, something that didn't register with me last night, but did now.

"Something was eating at you. That last night you said to me—maybe if I had asked questions I *couldn't* have gotten answers. Not last night."

"I couldn't understand then why he would do it. Break in here. I had taken such steps to prevent that." He peered over at the package on the table. "The answer came to me today. Go over, look at it."

I got out of my chair and examined the wrapped package from every angle.

"No, no," he cried exasperatedly. "The label. Read it!"

I did, then turned to the priest.

He said, "If you give to a thief he cannot steal from you and then is no longer a thief."

"William Saroyan."

"After he left that first night, after you left, I spent a lot of time thinking about Mr. Knarr and the monstrance. I did some of that thinking on my knees. What is it? A piece of gold, artfully shaped and beautiful. But, without the presence that can transform it, it's only an object. And I would have it forever, anyway, its image pressed upon my mind. This would be quite enough for me. But never for Nero Knarr. He would have it! One way or the other. In my mind, you can't sell a gift; but nothing tells me you cannot make it, in turn, a gift. This gift could spare Mr. Knarr the need of committing some rash act, could perhaps redeem him."

I turned to hide a skeptic's smile and showed a fresh and false interest in the package, rereading there Nero Knarr's name and address on its label.

"I had specified it must be delivered to him personally," Father Bax went on, "but it never was. He had left home, no doubt headed here, when UPS tried to deliver it."

"And then they returned it to you after trying again today and being told that Knarr would never sign for another thing."

"Yes, that's so."

I looked again at the old cabinet upon which the monstrance had stood last time I saw it. "Well, aren't you going to unwrap it and put it back up there?"

He waited before answering; seemed to be giving a lot of thought to what should have been an unadorned "yes" or "no." Little beads of glowing sweat appeared about his forehead and on his upper lip. Finally, as if it were an effort, he answered me.

"Possession is one with loss. Don't trouble yourself, Oscar; it's Dante. I'll put a new label over the old. Then off to the missions for it. Doubtless they'll find a use for the proceeds of its sale. It will end up in some appropriate and secure place, a cathedral or a museum."

"Matthew, six-nineteen."

"Eh?"

"Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth where thieves break through and steal."

"You've shortened it, Oscar, but you're right. Possessions are poison."

MYSTERY MINIQUIZ

In the 1940 movie *Michael Shayne, Private Detective*, who played the lead?

The shamus was played by Lloyd Nolan.

What was the relationship between The Lone Ranger and The Green Hornet?

Brit Reid (The Green Hornet) was the grand-nephew of John Reid (The Lone Ranger).

Who was Captain Jacoby?

The sea captain who delivered The Maltese Falcon.

Who was Jack Griffin?

The invisible man in H.G. Wells' novel, played in the 1933 movie by Claude Rains.

The dying man hadn't said "Rosebud!" but something just as mysterious. And what about all those personal items in his closet? Private Eye Ed Noon was determined to find the answers!

Conversation While Prying

by MICHAEL AVALLONE

"I GET THE IMPRESSION YOU DON'T WANT TO TALK TO me, doctor."

"That is correct. So if you'll take your hat off my desk—"

"Look, Dr. Warner. Let's stop fencing. You know why I'm here. Dapper's wife sent me. The fourth one. The will is being contested. That means she's in a bind. I'm here to help her. Anything you could tell me about the late but great Dapper would help. She's talking with her checkbook, doctor.. She doesn't quite want charity from you."

"I don't read the gossip columns. Which Mrs. Dapper are we talking about?"

"I told you. Number Four. The Hollywood one. You saw her in some Z movies maybe ten years ago. Or don't you go to the flicks?"

"No, I do not. After Garbo, the movies had nothing for me."

"Yeah? Too thin for my blood. Wanda Lang, I'm talking about. The Whoopee Girl. She never could act but she could show her chest. She gave it all up when she married Willis Thornton Dapper."

"Oh. Well—yes. I do know who you mean. There was something in *The Medical Journal* about the implausibility of her bust line. The blonde woman with the tiny waist. She's very lovely, isn't she?"

"She was if you liked Holstein cows. But she's mad right now. She wants Dapper's millions all to herself. You being the man who said his heart stopped beating and giving the cops his last words, well, she thought you might have remembered something that would sound good in court."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you, Mr. Noon."

"Don't you, really? Look, doctor. Four very famous single-minded broads can cut themselves a slice of Dapper money. The oil wells, the mining properties, the Hollywood studio, the American Tel and Tel shares, that island in the Pacific—all of that is up for grabs. Wanda Lang Dapper says these other three dames have no rights. She should get everything. Now if she could prove that, apart from her wedding license that Dapper thought of her and her alone when he kicked the bucket—well, can't you see how good that would sound in a court of law?"

"What's she worried about? Her marriage is legal, isn't it?"

"Sound as a dollar, but some of his three divorces are a mite shaky. The Reno one isn't too solid and that quickie he got in Arkansas could cause trouble. Oh, he settled a fortune in separation loot on the ex-Mrs. Dappers but Wanda wants to make sure."

"I still don't follow you."

"Doctor Warner, can't you remember anything he said when he died that would make a loving widow happy and content?"

"My statement is already in the record, Mr. Noon. I told the police. As Dapper died, in my arms literally since I was there as a guest on his yacht, he said . . . and I'm quoting him verbatim here: '*Toys, toys, nothing but goddamn toys . . .*' Sounds ridiculous, I agree and I did leave out the 'goddamn' because of the newspapers, but that's what he said. A childhood memory coming back at the last breath of consciousness: It happens, you know."

"You're not listening carefully, doctor. Wanda Lang wants better than that."

"I'm sorry for her. She should have been there in the first place instead of traipsing around on the Riviera."

"Sure, Doctor Warner, but this Orson Welles routine from *Citizen Kane* isn't exactly what I mean here. I don't care if Dapper was talking about Rosebud, sleds, electric trains or his Grandma's pussy cat. All I want from you is something a little more tangible. Something that reads and sounds better. Like say—'Wanda, I love you. I've never loved any

other woman—'."

"You wish me to lie, Mr. Noon?"

"I wish you to be smart and realize how much you could use, say twenty-five thousand dollars. That is how much such a white lie is worth to Mrs. Wanda Lang Dapper."

"Please get out, Mr. Noon. I'm not interested. I didn't like your look when you came in, I like it less now."

"Be smart, Dr. Warner. Forget my look. Think of the money."

"I'm being very smart, Mr. Noon. My medical practice means the world to me. I wouldn't cheapen it with any sum you could name."

"I could name a higher figure. Much higher."

"Will you please go now, Mr. Noon?"

"That's your last word?"

"My very last word."

"You're the doctor. Mind if I ask you one wee question?"

"Just one and then go. I haven't the time or the patience to bother about your client's sorry mental attitude."

"Okay, okay.. You made your point. Can't blame a poor, bereaved widow from trying, can you? Now—about those thirty-nine items found in Dapper's private wall safe. The ones at Hawk's Head. What do you make of that?"

"I'm afraid again I don't follow you."

"Doc, doc. I'm talking about that harvest of female doodads. The girdle, the bra, the lipstick, the comb. All those girlie goodies. Unmarked and unnamed. What would a man like Dapper need with them? Was he a queer or just a souvenir collector?"

"Oh."

"You said that funny. That mean something?"

"No, no—the police were puzzled by that too, weren't they? But for once the papers didn't lie. Mr. Dapper was a very heterosexual male. Perhaps, *hyper-heterosexual*. He wasn't a transvestite or a mama's boy. Or anything sexually abnormal. His fondness for women was rather clear."

"Yes but it seems kind of perverted to me that a man would collect junk like that. Doesn't it bother you?"

"Not at all. Some men are nostalgic to the point where they need tangible reminders about them to recall some women in their lives. I would say Willis Thornton Dapper fits that category, too."

"Nostalgic. You can't prove it by me. I'm finished with a dame I don't need anything to remember her by."

"I might suggest, Mr. Noon, that you weren't Willis Thornton Dapper. He was a big man. Not ordinary. As most of us are."

"You talking about the size of his bankbook, his height or his tool, doctor?"

"I'm talking about—his uniqueness. His difference. Oh, get out and leave me alone."

"Sure, sure. I'm going. But what do those thirty-nine odds-and-ends mean besides wolf trophies? I ask you."

"Ask Dapper. Or his Maker. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a full morning schedule ahead of me. Appointments. You understand."

"Sure, I do. You're brushing me off. Same way you brushed off Mrs. Dapper the Fourth's filthy lucre. Okay, doc, I'll leave you to your shining code. But I do think you're a high-principled idiot."

"As you wish. Goodbye to you, Mr. Noon."

"Sure."

"Oh, Mr. Noon—"

"Changed your mind already—"

"No, of course not. Just a point. If you're going to ask yourself why Willis Thornton Dapper saved those items that seem to bother you so much, you might as well ask why people save stamps, bottle caps and old theatre programs."

"That's a big help, that is. Some guys dig stamps, bottle caps and old theatre programs."

"Then I think you answered your own question, Mr. Noon."

"I did?"

"Yes. Willis Thornton Dapper *liked* women."

"Oh, sure. Is that all?"

"Close the door behind you. Don't slam it. My patients are very nervous, you know."

"What else, when you shrink heads for a living? Bye, Dr. Warner. See you in court."

"That I doubt."

"Don't doubt it. In addition to my job as private investigator, I'm also a process server. Kindly note this document I now extract from my inside jacket pocket. Presto—it's a subpoena commanding your appearance before Judge Appleby the day after tomorrow in his nice air-conditioned chambers on Wimple Street. I don't think I have to hand it to you, do I? No, I didn't think so. I'll just leave it on the chair here near the door. So long, Dr. Warner. It's been fun trying to bribe you."

Sure, I knew what was going on, and I told the truth—more or less!

What Would You Have Done?

by DICK STODGHILL

EVERYONE IN THE VILLAGE MUST BE SHOCKED BY WHAT happened in the house out back. Shocked but probably not surprised. That's a surmise on my part because I've missed all the excitement lying here in bed with two broken legs.

Justin, my boy, tells me the diner's been closed the last few days while the out-of-town owner tries to find someone to run it. That's what brought the Rolfe family here six years ago. Ted, the father, took over as manager. He and Jenny, his wife, and their eleven-year-old son Ralph needed a place to live, so I rented them the old house at the back of my property.

Before Ted arrived the only people who patronized the diner were strangers who didn't know better. The food was terrible and the manager and only waitress tried to outdo each other in being nasty.

Ted changed that in a hurry. He got rid of the waitress and hired a couple of girls who knew how to smile. He was a first-rate cook and had the knack of making people feel at home. It didn't take him long to learn the names of everyone in this part of the county. He kept up a steady banter with the customers and within a month the diner was the most popular place in town.

Jenny Rolfe was as well liked as her husband. She was a small, almost frail woman with a warm smile and a real affinity for people. For the first five years Jenny spent a lot of time at the diner, helping

serve when the place was busy or taking the money at the register. Most of the time, though, she would just visit with the customers. She would sit down and they'd talk back and forth and before long it seemed like Ted and Jenny Rolfe had been around town all their lives.

Ralph was something else again. I sized him up as a rat the minute I laid eyes on him and nothing ever happened to change my mind. But a family of rodents wouldn't have put up with him. It wasn't long before it was a popular topic around here; how could two people as nice as Ted and Jenny have a mean, rotten kid like that? I sure didn't know the answer.

WHAT BOTHERED ME RIGHT FROM THE START WAS THAT
Ralph had things all his own way. I don't think either Ted or Jenny ever took a belt to him and God knows he needed it. Even when he was only eleven some of the things he said to his parents were so bad I never repeated them because no one would have believed me. He didn't improve with age.

That first spring they were here Jenny planted rows of flowers along each side of the driveway back by their house. I wasn't around much but usually when I'd stop by she'd be working on them, really enjoying herself. Had a talent for it, too, a regular green thumb.

I happened to be home the day Ralph rode his bicycle over both rows. By the time he'd had his fun there wasn't a thing standing an inch above the ground. I looked out the window when I heard Jenny say, "Oh, Ralph, why?"

He had a sneer on his face. For a few seconds he laughed at her. Then he said, "I'm hungry. Fix me somethin' to eat."

Jenny had a stricken look and it seemed to me that when she turned from the trampled flowers to her son she was wondering what kind of monster she had brought into the world. But she went inside and a few minutes later called, "Your lunch is ready, son."

One flower had popped back up a little. Ralph finished grinding it into the dirt with his heel and then sat down with his back against a tree. "Bring it out here," he yelled. She brought it out to him on a tray.

Jenny never planted flowers again but that was just one of a hundred or more incidents I witnessed even though I wasn't around the place too often. The worst that ever resulted was Ted or Jenny would say, "Ralph, I wish you hadn't done that," or, "You shouldn't talk that way, son." His response was always predictable.

From the stories I heard, Ralph was just as bad at school and around the village. The classic bully, only meaner than most. A kid who loved to destroy or deface anything people valued. The older he got, the more

damage he did.

Probably the only real beating he ever took came from me. I was in the living room one day when Ralph was about fifteen. Without warning there was a shotgun blast right outside. He had killed a rabbit not ten feet from my front door.

He stood there sneering at me until I leaped at him from the front porch. After a minute or two he was pleading for mercy. When I cooled down a little, I let him up but not before I took the shell out of the second barrel. Then I stood over him while he repaired the damage the shot had done to the porch railing. It was the last time I ever saw him with the shotgun and believe me, with a punk like that I kept an eye out for it.

THE ACCIDENT HAPPENED A FEW WEEKS AGO ON THE highway between my place and the village. A drunk swerved at the last second and hit me head on. The seat went forward and snapped both my legs. After a few days in the hospital Justin brought me home when I refused to go to his place. He stops over every morning and cleans up and brings along a combination breakfast and lunch. Then he comes by again about two-thirty in the afternoon on his way to work the three o'clock shift at the wire mill. He leaves a cold supper for me and stops on his way home a little after eleven so I get by all right.

It's funny the things you learn when you're flat on your back and people gradually forget you're around. The thing that really stunned me was finding out that Ted Rolfe was a wife beater. He was the last man on earth I would have pegged as one.

Ted would usually come home about two o'clock in the afternoon. By then the lunch hour rush at the diner was over and he'd stay a couple of hours before heading back to handle the supper trade. I had noticed that Jenny seldom went to the diner the past year so maybe the beatings were a recent development. He'd slap her around pretty good though. Enough so I could hear it thirty yards away. Then sometimes I'd hear Jenny outside crying a little. A few months ago her face was all bruised up. She told me she had fallen down and at the time I had no reason to doubt her.

Of course Ralph was as miserable as ever. A week ago he was loafing around when his mother called, "Ralph, your dad wants you to help him carry out the trash."

It was quiet for a few seconds and then his mother called, "Ralph," again. This time the kid answered. "Tell the old bastard to do it himself."

I lay there cursing under my breath, wishing I could get up and

thrash him myself. Jenny had come closer and I could hear her say kind of softly, "Oh; Ralph, I wish you wouldn't say things like that." He laughed at her.

THREE DAYS AGO TED CAME HOME ABOUT TWO O'CLOCK as usual. Half an hour later Justin stopped by with my supper. He stayed and talked for fifteen minutes and then left for the wire mill.

He had been gone maybe ten minutes when Ted started giving Jenny a bad time again. He ranted and raved a couple of minutes and then I heard flesh strike flesh. By then I was sick of it so I used the remote control to switch on the TV and watched a soap opera where the people *really* had problems.

It was about ten after three when I heard the shotgun blast. I flipped off the TV and listened but there wasn't another sound. I thought about calling the sheriff but when it had been quiet for five minutes or so I figured they were talking rationally for a change and decided there was no point in embarrassing them. It might just make it worse for Jenny.

The bus from the high school dropped Ralph off about quarter to four. I heard him shuffle along the driveway and knew the peace and quiet at the house out back was about to be shattered. I was right. Ralph just about had time to get there when the shotgun blasted away again.

Of course by then I knew something was badly wrong. I suppose I should have called the sheriff and I still can't really say why I didn't.

There was another sound from out back and it stayed that way for three hours. Then the screen door slammed and the car started. I reached over and switched on my lamp but there was a brilliant flash and then semi-darkness again. The bulb had burned out. I lay there in the dusk and waited for the car to pull out of the driveway. It never did. For twenty minutes the motor idled, then it was shut off and I heard the door slam again.

Another ten minutes passed and it was totally dark by then. A car turned in at the drive and when it passed my window I could see a red globe on top and knew it was a sheriff's cruiser.

The minutes dragged while I lay there listening to the sounds out back: doors slamming, footsteps, the crackling of the police radio. Voices, too, but too soft to hear what they were saying. Then a couple more vehicles pulled in the driveway. There was a lot of activity but I had no way of knowing what was going on.

When things started to settle down I heard footsteps on the porch and then Bill Tompkins, the sheriff, called, "Anybody home?"

I yelled, "Come on in, Bill, and turn on some lights." He did, out in the living room, and then I told him where the spare bulbs were and he replaced the one in my lamp.

He pulled a chair up close to the bed and sat stroking his chin for a minute. Finally he said, "Know what happened out back?"

I shook my head.

"Ted Rolfe killed his son with a shotgun and then used the second barrel on himself."

I gave a low whistle. The sheriff said, "Didn't you hear the shots?" I nodded.

"Didn't you wonder about them?"

"You hear shots out here in the country now and then, even out of hunting season. How'd you find out about it?"

"Jenny called. She'd been down in Indianapolis since the middle of the afternoon. Got back half an hour ago and found them. God, what a shock that must have been for her."

"Is she okay?"

"She's still in shock, I think. It hasn't really soaked in yet."

"You say she was in Indianapolis?"

The sheriff nodded. "Yeah. She must have called as soon as she got back because the hood of the car was still warm. She said she left when Ted came home from the diner after lunch. I asked her how he was going to get back and she told me he was going to walk since it was a nice day. It's better'n a mile but she says he liked to do that and I guess I do remember seeing him walking it sometimes."

"It's not a bad walk when the weather's nice. Do it myself once in awhile."

"Did you hear the car?"

I nodded again. "Yeah, I heard it."

The sheriff sighed and stood up. "It's a messy business but I guess that wraps it up. It's good that you heard the shots and the car. That kind of verifies everything."

"Right. I heard the shots and the car."

Bill left and the activity outside went on a while longer, but since then it's been quiet out back. Justin tells me that Jenny stayed at the motel on the other side of the village until after the funerals this morning. Then she left and I'm sure she won't be back.

It's strange, that light bulb burning out when it did so the house stayed dark. Things might have worked out differently otherwise. Maybe not, of course.

One thing I learned is that a person can tell the truth and not tell the truth at the same time if the questions are worded right and there aren't

too many of them.

I was afraid I'd have visitors nosing around but so far I've been lucky. By the time I'm back on my feet the excitement should have died away. Someday I'll be asked about that afternoon, I know, and the questions may be put differently than when the sheriff asked them. But I'll give the same answers I gave Bill Tompkins.

What would you have done? ●

MYSTERY MINIQUIZ

In the early forties, actress Glenda Farrell starred as a wise-cracking reporter, with Barton MacLane as her policeman associate, in a series of cinematic second features. What was the name of the character she portrayed in these films?

Torchy Blane.

Who murdered Mary Anne Nicholls and Marie Kelly?

They were the first and last prostitutes murdered by Jack the Ripper.

What British school did James Bond attend?

007 went to Eton.

What happened at Bodega Bay?

The Birds attacked the residents in the 1963 Hitchcock movie.

In the late 1930's Twentieth Century Fox produced a series of mysteries starring Peter Lorre in the lead role. What was the name of the sleuth in these movies?

Lorre played the Japanese detective Mr. Moto.

What do Warner Oland, Sidney Toler, and Roland Winters have in common?

They all portrayed Charlie Chan on the screen.

When I pulled in behind the car, I saw fabric flopping on the convertible top. There was a ragged hole about three inches across above the driver's seat. I knew what I'd find inside the car, and I didn't want to look at it!

The Gray Mercedes

by W. GLENN DUNCAN

“FILL ‘ER UP?”

“Please.”

“Passing through?”

“Sort of. Say, maybe you can help me. I’m looking for a car. A gray Mercedes convertible, one of the small sporty types.”

“No Mercedes dealer in this town, mister.”

“Not a new Mercedes. A used one. A *particular* used one. The driver is a girl in her early twenties.”

“Why do you want that car especially?”

“It’s kind of odd, I guess. My boss collects Mercedes.”

“You must work for a rich boss.”

“I do. Thing is, he only collects the first car of each model run. He got a line on this convertible and sent me up here to find it. He wants to buy it, if she’ll sell.”

“Crazy guy, your boss.”

“No argument there, friend. You seen it? The license number is . . .”

“Wouldn’t remember the plate number. Forget my own, even. But I seen your car, all right. Gray Mercedes stands out in a little town like this.”

It was a lucky break. I had been looking for the car since noon the
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day before and had nothing to show for it but an address, a locked apartment and a vacant parking slot.

"Where did you see it?"

"Here. Last night. Late, maybe eleven, eleven-thirty. I was standing right here, pumping gas, when that Mercedes started to pull in. Then, real jerky-like, it pulled back into traffic and went north. Musta smoked off ten, twenty dollars worth of rubber."

"North, eh? See the driver?"

"Top was up. Too dark."

"Yeah."

"There you are, mister. That'll be twelve-seventy-five."

"Right. What's north of here, anyway?"

"Hills."

SO I FOLLOWED THE ROAD NORTH OVER GREEN, LUMPY countryside and found the Mercedes parked in a scenic look-out. It was a dreary day, though, and the view wasn't much because of the dank overcast that squatted on the hilltops.

When I pulled in behind it and confirmed the license number, I saw fabric flopping on the convertible top. There was a ragged hole about three inches across above the driver's seat.

I knew what I'd find inside the car.

Her face looked like an old pumpkin. Her cheeks were swollen and distorted, dark orange from the broken blood vessels, and the back of her head was missing. A smear on the headrest showed where her head had slammed back as she died, but now her chin touched her chest. Her unseeing eyes stared at the barrel of a shotgun stuck between her knees.

I didn't open the door or touch the car, just turned away and gulped lungfuls of moist air.

I got back into the rental car, planning to report it in town, but before I started the engine, a pickup with a camper shell on the back pulled into the look-out. The middle-aged couple goggled and craned their necks at the Mercedes, but they didn't want to see her up close. They agreed to stop in town and call the sheriff while I waited with the pumpkin-lady.

At the far end of the look-out, a concrete picnic table grew like a square mushroom in a grassy clearing in the trees. I waited there for the law, wondering how long it would take a small-town coroner to do his job and when the cops would release the car. If I had to wait too long, my expenses would mount up and take all the profit out of the job.

Killing time, I wandered around the picnic area. Grotty debris indicated the place was used by more local lovers than tourists. A

quartet of ruts showed where someone had gotten stuck and used four-wheel drive to claw their way free, probably worried they wouldn't get young Janie or Harry's wife back home in time.

I heard the siren when it was still two or three miles away and I started back to the convertible. We arrived together.

A BIG BLUE BUICK SLID TO A STOP WITH LOCKED BRAKES. There were no official markings on it, but a magnetic flasher unit had been stuck on the roof. Two men got out. The driver, dressed in a khaki twill uniform, walked rapidly to the Mercedes. The passenger was a heavy man in a dark suit and he waited for me to come to him. His western hat and boots screamed "County Sheriff" at me.

"You the one who found it?"

"Yeah, about twenty minutes ago."

"Why? You always poke around parked cars?"

"I was looking for it."

I showed him my license and paperwork. His head swivelled from the papers to the convertible as he compared the license plate with the repossession order. "We don't see many private detectives around here," he said.

"You don't have many cars worth repossessing around here."

He glared at me for slighting the motoring tastes of his constituents, then he bellowed at his deputy. "Now don't you touch that car, Davey. Not till Gil gets here with his kit."

"Her name is Sheila Keithley, Sheriff. It looks like suicide. She stuck the barrel in her mouth and thumbed the trigger, I'd say."

"Oh, well, that do take the strain out of this case then. I'll just tell my boys not to work too hard, 'cause Mr. Louis Benjamin Crosby from the big city done worked it out already."

"Ben."

"What?"

"Ben. My name. Ben Crosby."

"Okay, Ben Crosby, why did you come up here? I thought you re-po guys just snatched cars out of parking lots and garages."

I told him about coming up empty at the girl's apartment and my lucky stop at the gas station. He grunted and left me. More cars and men arrived.

An hour later, they had tried and failed to get any fingerprints off the condensation-dampened car body, found the usual jumble of useless partial prints inside and removed Sheila Keithley's corpse. As the ambulance pulled out, the sheriff came back to his car, holding the shotgun casually in one hand.

"Got anything?" I asked him.

"Naw, smears and smudges, but nothing any good. And, hell, look at it! Damn gun must be twenty years old. Maybe sold privately eight or ten times since it was new. I bet there's fifty shotguns like this in the country and half the people who own them don't remember where they got 'em or how long they've been kicking around the house."

"Yeah. Well. Look, sheriff, when can I have the car?"

"Lemme see, now. The coroner and I, we kind of agree with you about the suicide angle. But my boys in town are going through the girl's apartment now and I want to hear from them. And the doc wants a better look at the body, but we all know what he's going to find. So, if nothing funny turns up—and I don't reckon it will—maybe tomorrow, late, I can release the car."

"Thanks. I'll stay the night and see you tomorrow."

"Try the Sunrise Motel. East of town. You can't miss it."

"You touting for the motel or you want to know where I'll be?"

"Both."

HE WAS RIGHT. THE SUNRISE MOTEL WAS EAST OF TOWN and I couldn't miss it. I called the office, told Gail I would be at least another day and a half on the repossession and asked her to let Daniels know.

"He won't be happy about this, Ben. You know how he hates to pay motel bills."

"Can't be helped. It would cost more for me to leave and then come back up here again. Besides, I think my expense accounts are works of art."

"So does he. That's what he hates about them."

By nine o'clock that night, I had mooched around town, played tourist far longer than the place deserved, and done my bit to keep expenses down by eating at the Big Red Burger Barn, Established 1967, Mel Harter, Proprietor.

I sprawled on the motel bed, retasted Mel's onions and watched a TV series about some poor rich folks in a big ugly house. They had as many problems as they had bank accounts.

A knock on the door was a welcome excuse to turn off the television. The woman outside was poorly lit by a flickering fluorescent light and I jumped. For an instant, I thought she was returning the Mercedes and then I remembered seeing her dead. Or someone like her.

"Mr. Crosby?"

"Yes?"

"Are you the Mr. Crosby who found my sister today?"

"Um, yeah, I guess I am. Come in."

She gingerly entered the motel room, took the chair I offered and watched me return to the bed.

"Mr. Crosby, I . . ."

"Ben. When you say 'Mr. Crosby', I think you're talking to my father. I'm Ben."

"Ben, then. I'm Karen Keithley, Sheila's sister."

"I could tell."

"The man at the sheriff's office said I could find you here."

"And you did. Congratulations. But I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed. The car goes back with me, as soon as they release it."

"The car? You think I care about that damned car?"

"It crossed my mind."

She wore a green skirt made from some shiny material and she picked at it with a fingernail for a long moment, then she said, "I thought private detectives worked on criminal cases, instead of chasing cars for finance companies."

"Most people think that. Too much television, probably. If people knew how little time we spend tailing people and fighting crime, we'd have to turn in our Junior G-men badges."

"You're very cynical, aren't you?"

"So I've been told."

"Mr. Crosby . . . uh, Ben, may we drop the witty repartee? You're a detective. I'm a client. I want you to find the man who murdered my sister."

"What makes you think she was murdered?"

"Everything! Sheila wouldn't commit suicide. And she was throwing herself at a disgusting man. He's capable of anything; even murder."

NORMALLY, I WOULD HAVE GOTTED RID OF HER. LISTENING to elaborate theories from grieving relatives is debilitating and fruitless. These days, too many people need a conspiracy to explain away sudden violence and there was never a suicide where the family believed good old Uncle George would take that long first step off the bridge.

Still, she intrigued me. She wasn't sad or weepy. If I read her right, she was angry and that was an unusual reaction for the sister of a suicide. Second, I'd been sent up here at the last minute to re-po the Mercedes. As usual, I knew almost nothing about the circumstances. The money isn't much and *tempus*, as they say, *fugits*. We start with a name, address and plate number. Usually, we end up with the car, though we rarely see the deadbeat who didn't make the payments on

time.

Now, Karen Keithley claimed to know why someone would want to blow away her sister. I wondered, too, why the girl had killed herself and it was a boring evening in a dull town and there was nothing decent on the tube. So I listened.

"Sheila and I were typical sisters, sharing teenage secrets and heartaches," she said. "But when we both left home, Sheila started running with a different crowd. And she changed jobs a lot. She was a secretary, then she worked in a department store for a while and, until recently, she had a job in a hotel in the city."

"We saw each other less and less as time passed. I'm a nurse and, what with shifts changing constantly, it's hard for me to have a social life. Sheila partied a lot, though. She always had a date and she became, well, I'd never say my own sister was a tramp, but she was . . . very active sexually."

"It's okay, I've heard of it. Go on."

"Well, Sheila always had to have the best things. Clothes, cars, furniture for her apartment. Our father helped her. He would give her money and co-sign loans for her. Oh, Sheila could wrap daddy around her little finger. He helped her buy the Mercedes you want to repossess. Sheila didn't need an expensive car like that, but she wanted it. So . . . daddy made the deposit, guaranteed the loan and helped her work out a longterm thing where the payments were just bearable. Even so, he had to make two or three payments himself, when she got behind and needed help."

"Then, about three months ago, daddy and Sheila had a falling out. He went to her apartment one Saturday afternoon when she didn't expect him. When he arrived, there was quite a party going on. I can't imagine Sheila letting daddy see that sort of thing unless she was drunk or stoned or something. Which she must have been, because she answered the door stark naked."

"And that bothered your father, I take it."

"Bothered him? It broke his heart! Sheila called me the next day. She was frantic and she asked me to talk to daddy. I tried, but he refused to discuss-it. He wouldn't talk about Sheila. He wouldn't talk *to* Sheila. He rewrote his will and disowned her. I know that's pretty strong these days, but he's a very old-fashioned man in many ways."

"What happened to Sheila after that?"

"She went downhill. She became sloppy and lost her pride. Without daddy's help, she couldn't make the payments on her car, she fell behind on her rent and she nearly lost her job at the hotel because she was sleeping with one of the bellboys. And then she met Simon

Bourke."

"Who's Bourke?"

"I think he's a replacement father-figure and boyfriend all mixed together in Sheila's mind."

"I mean who is he? Not which psychology book did you read last."

"Oh, sorry. Simon Bourke is a survivalist. Are you familiar with the term?"

"Sure. People who stockpile food, build cabins in the woods and plan to shoot their hungry neighbors after the bomb drops. They think the system is about to collapse. And they might be right, you know."

"I doubt it, but you know the kind of man I mean. Bourke was staying at the hotel for a soldier-of-fortune convention and Sheila met him there. She started chasing him. Apparently, a one-night stand for Bourke was the beginning of a dependency relationship for Sheila."

"There you go again."

"But that's what it was! Sheila needed Bourke. She quit her job and followed him up here."

"Oh, I get it now. Bourke lives here."

"Yes. He has a store in town where he sells things to people who think like he does. He lives back in the hills somewhere. Probably in a fort," she said sarcastically.

"I think I saw his place today. Looks like it used to be a small supermarket, down from the movie theater?"

"Yes, that's it."

"So, what happened? Presumably, Sheila and Bourke did not retire to the wilderness to raise a crop of little commandos."

"Definitely not. Sheila kept chasing Bourke and he kept using her. He would spend the night with her, promise to call, then ignore her until next time. I came up here a few weeks ago to talk sense into Sheila, but she wouldn't listen. She still thought he would marry her and they'd live happily ever after. It was ridiculous, of course, but she believed it. And, even though you laugh, I think she was attracted to him psychologically. Bourke is an authoritarian, arrogant man with an animal attraction to some women. He's totally chauvinistic, of course."

"Of course. You've met him, then?"

"Once. I went to his store and asked him to leave Sheila alone." Her mouth twisted. "He laughed at me!"

"All right, I get the picture now. You came back for another talk with Sheila, found her apartment swarming with deputies, right?"

"Yes. They sent me to the sheriff. He doesn't believe me about Bourke. He said I should save stories like that for you."

"He would. Look, Karen, you're going off the deep end. Why would Bourke want to kill Sheila? For the sort of man you've described, Sheila is a dream come true. Available when he wanted her and no commitment required on his part."

"I know; that seems funny to me, too. But I knew Sheila too well. She would never commit suicide, no matter how mixed she became."

"You're arguing against yourself there."

"Damn it, I know that! But why would she *shoot* herself? I've seen suicides at the hospital. And, in five years, I've never seen a woman use a gun."

"Now, you're right about that part: Ladies usually take pills or jump."

"And Sheila didn't own a shotgun. She never fired a gun in her life."

"Maybe not, but it fits with her trying to land Bourke. She might have been getting shooting lessons from him, trying to impress him with her new, woodsy, lifestyle."

"Maybe." Karen dragged out the word, doubtful.

"Karen, I will not take your money to look into dark corners for a man who almost certainly isn't there."

"Thanks a lot!"

"Wait a minute, let me finish. I'm going to be in town most of tomorrow with nothing to do. I'll drop by Bourke's store, look at him, talk to him. If anything I learn changes my mind, *then* we'll talk about money. Okay?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"And where do I find you if I need to?"

"Across the courtyard. Room Eleven."

She left and I tried the television again. The beautiful people had been replaced by a man trying to eat a thousand pancakes in twelve minutes or something like that. That's disgusting, I thought.

Turned out that was almost the name of the show.

THE NEXT MORNING, I FOUND BOURKE'S STORE AGAIN. The windows were painted solid white. Red letters said BOURKE'S on the front door. In the alleyway between the store and a barber shop, a green Bronco sat looking useful and well-used. A hefty winch was bolted to the front bumper, rooster tails of splattered mud decorated the fenders and a rifle was racked behind the driver's seat.

Inside, the store was stark. The supermarket gondolas had been replaced with rows of bolted metal shelving. The only food I saw was canned, dried, dehydrated and, in all likelihood, booby trapped. There was reading material for sale, too. For five dollars, a mimeographed

booklet promised to show me how to make a bomb out of ingredients from my kitchen cupboards.

Bourke came out of a back room, drying chapped hands on a ratty towel. He was short and sinewy, in his middle thirties, and he looked fit. His face was clean-shaven beneath a blond crewcut. He had a clipped, curt look about him and he talked the same way.

"Help you?"

"Maybe. I'm looking for a gun."

"New in town?"

"No, I'm driving through. I travel a lot, mostly at night and I thought I might keep something in the car. For protection."

"Good idea. This way."

As we walked down an aisle, he plucked a bottle of pills off a shelf, popped three of them into his mouth and swallowed them dry.

"APCs," he said. "Headache."

APCs, not aspirin. Bourke was either ex-military or he liked to play soldier.

"Here you go. Ingram MAC-10. Comes in .45 or 9 millimeter. This one's a .45."

The MAC-10 was a caricature of a pistol. It was chunky and flat, with a short barrel protruding from the stamped metal casing. A long clip stuck down from the pistol grip.

"Can't sell you the fully automatic version," Bourke said, "or the folding stock. They're illegal. Damn shame, too, because the automatic is the best anti-personnel weapon available today. Nine hundred fifty rounds a minute. You can really clear out a hut or a room with that kind of firepower."

"You sell many of these?"

"Enough. You want it? Two hundred fifty dollars and a three day wait. State law. I don't like it but I can't beat it."

"I'll pass. Too rich for me. And I won't be around for three days. Maybe I'll pick up a used pistol somewhere."

"Up to you." He put the ugly gun back on the shelf.

"I'm going to be around tonight, though. Car trouble. Any action in this town?"

"What kind of action?"

"Action. You know, broads."

"Broads I don't need and you I don't need, buddy!" Bourke picked up the MAC-10 again, withdrew the clip and began click-clicking cartridges into it from a box nearby. "I think you've finished shopping now. Why don't you get lost?"

That sounded like a good idea to me, too.

THE STEAK SANDWICHES AT MEL'S WERE CHEWY ENOUGH to slow me down awhile and I tried to figure out what bothered me about Bourke. I had the feeling I knew something I didn't know I knew, but it wouldn't come, so I put it aside. When I drove to the sheriff's office, Deputy Davey was on the desk.

"Hey, Crosby! Sheriff said I was to tell you he'll release that car about four, maybe four-thirty."

"Thanks. Coroner finished with the Keithley girl, is he?"

"Nearly. I mean, it's pretty damned obvious what killed her, isn't it?"

"Looked like it to me."

"Oh, he did find one interesting thing, though." Davey leaned over the counter and dropped his voice to a hoarse whisper. "She had that new disease. Hoppers or something."

"Herpes?"

"That's it! Don't that beat all? Nice clean town like this and a big city girl comes in here with that dirty stuff . . ."

He said the last of it to my back and a closing door. I knew then what had happened to Sheila Keithley.

"KAREN, YOU MAY HAVE BEEN RIGHT, AFTER ALL."

"Bourke confessed?"

"Confessed? My God, woman, how much television do you watch?"

"Well, what . . ."

"How many doctors in this town?"

"How would I know? Hang on, I'll find out."

Our positions were reversed from the night before. I sat in the chair in her room while she perched on the bed and rifled through the slim county telephone book.

"Two in the book," she said after a minute. "One here in town and one at a little settlement about twenty miles away."

"What's the local doctor's name?"

"Ungar."

She made the telephone call exactly as I told her. While she waited for an answer, she chewed her lower lip. "Oh, hello. Mr. Bourke? Doctor Ungar's office. Doctor has your test results now and he wants to see you again. Would this Thursday at four be convenient?"

After twenty seconds, she hung up.

"What did he say?"

"He swore, then he said 'okay.' And then he started yelling. He accused the doctor of blabbing to everybody about his problem. When he got really foul, I hung up."

"Great! Now, our only problem is if he calls the doctor back."

"Ben, what is going on? *Did Bourke kill Sheila?*"

"No time. If he finds out that call was a fake, he'll rabbit. And once he gets back in those hills, they'll never find him."

"But . . ."

"Come on, let's go."

WE USED MY RENTAL AND WENT THROUGH THE TOWN'S only traffic light on the red. I stopped a block from Bourke's store, jumped out and waved Karen behind the wheel. "There's an alley this side of Bourke's place. Stop short of it and wait. If you hear a car start in the alley, pull forward and block the exit. Then leave the car there and run! If nothing happens, we've missed him."

There was no sign of life when I eased into the store. As I tiptoed down the aisle where he had showed me the nasty little gun, I heard a voice in the back room.

I found the MAC-10 with its half-loaded clip lying next to it. The clip chirriked into place and I pulled the bolt back to put a live round in the chamber. I found the safety and clicked it off, then moved toward the door and Bourke's voice.

". . . wasn't you, then who the hell was it? . . . Doc, if I thought you were lying, I'd kill you . . . No! Forget it!"

When the receiver clattered onto its cradle, I braced to meet him. Then an unseen door slammed and I knew he had gone out a back exit. I kicked the office door open and found myself facing another, more substantial door across the ten-foot-square room.

The Bronco started as I cracked the back door. Bourke snatched the stubby little truck into gear and jack-rabbited for the mouth of the alley. I followed at a run.

Karen was a few seconds late, but she jerked the rental to a halt in time to bottleneck him. Bourke leaned out the window and roared at her, but she followed orders and ran, knees high and pumping as she darted out of sight.

Bourke opened the truck door with his left hand and backed out, his right hand reaching for the racked rifle. He froze when I stopped beside him and screwed the muzzle of the MAC-10 into his right ear.

"Hold it, Bourke. Or I'll see if a .45 slug will do as good a job as your old shotgun."

WHILE DEPUTY DAVEY TOOK BOURKE BACK TO THE cells, I told the sheriff and Karen how I figured it out. "When I found out Sheila had herpes, Bourke's chapped hands and headaches made

sense."

Karen interrupted. "Classic herpes symptoms. Stress-related headaches and constant washing in an attempt to feel clean. Burkholzter's book on stress says . . ."

"Karen."

"Yes, Ben?"

"Spare us the book-learning, please."

"You . . . peasant!"

"You got it. Now, sheriff, you'll find marks at the look-out where somebody got stuck in an off-the-road vehicle. I thought it was lovers at the time, but now I'd say it was Bourke. I figure when Sheila gave him the herpes, he decided to kill her. It's the sort of response that fits a man like Bourke. So he stashed his Bronco at the look-out. He probably hitch-hiked back to town. You might find whoever picked him up, but I doubt it. I would have thumbed down an interstate trucker and I'll bet he did, too.

"Then, Bourke got Sheila. All he had to do was phone and she would have come running. He had his shotgun with him and he forced her to drive up into the hills. At the look-out, he thumped her on the head and arranged the shotgun to make it look like suicide. He knew the blast would eliminate any trace of a blow on the back of her head. After that, he drove away. He was home free, or so he thought, until he found out about Karen's faked phone call and knew someone was after him."

Throughout our talk, the sheriff's hat had inched lower and lower toward his eyebrows. He looked like he was trying to climb up inside it to hide.

"I suppose, boy, you feel real proud of yourself?"

"Well, sort of. Gives you a warm glow inside, you know?"

"Smart-mouth! Well, go on and take that damned car. You earned it."

"Thanks, sheriff."

Deputy Davey swaggered up then, bouncy and high after slamming the cell door on the most exciting criminal he'd seen in a long time. "Well, I'll be! Ain't that something? What do you reckon that coroner's gonna say now?"

"I suppose he'll say Sheila died of herpes."

"Herpes? Hell, Crosby, herpes ain't fatal!"

"It is when you give it to Simon Bourke."

•

The girl had the sweet face of a teenager and the eyes of a tiger, and in her hands was a rifle, pointing right at him!

Tara

by R. TUTTLE

DOCTOR JENSON WAS SITTING IN HIS LIVING ROOM IN front of a crackling fire in the red brick fireplace. Outside the old frame house a violent Pacific storm raged, slamming sheets of cold rain at the small, coastal town of Wellsford. A half mile to the west, huge waves were crashing to their death against the rugged California coast. Just north of San Francisco, the area had been under constant attack by a series of Pacific storms for the past month.

Jenson was a slender, middle-aged man with a pleasant, partially bearded face, sparkling blue eyes and thinning black hair. Relaxed after a tough day at the local hospital, he let his thoughts thread their way aimlessly through fleeting memories of medical school, Vietnam frontline duty, his first delivery, marriage and divorce—he sighed and

reached for the hot coffee pot on the table beside him. He was about to pour some into a cup when the door burst open.

A girl in faded army fatigues and cap stepped in and pointed a rifle at him. She had the sweet, round face of a teenager and the eyes of a tiger.

Jenson set the coffee pot down and stared. Had he fallen asleep? Was this a dream?

"You the Doc?" she asked, pulling off a cloth cap, revealing a mop of unruly dark hair.

"Yes." He was suddenly reminded of a perky high school cheerleader—except for the gun. "Are you sick?"

"No." She gripped the gun tighter. "Anybody else in the house?"

"Only me. What's the problem?"

"A guy's been shot by the pigs. You gotta fix him up." She glared at him.

"Why not," he shrugged. "I'm a doctor. Bring him in."

"He ain't here. You're coming with me." She saw some after dinner mints on the table and with a quick motion grabbed a handful. "No tricks, Doc." She shoved the mints in her mouth.

He rose. "I'll get my bag."

She followed him into his office where he put some medical equipment into his bag and as an afterthought, added a fifth of whiskey and a package of cigars.

"I'll get a thermos and take the coffee," he said, eyeing her.

She nodded and they went into the small kitchen. She watched him as he picked up the coffee pot and poured the steaming liquid into the thermos.

"Duffy—he's the guy who got shot—likes cream and sugar," she said through a mouthful of mints.

He nodded and added sugar and cream. Then he put on rubbers, a raincoat and a rain hat. She dumped the rest of the mints in her pocket.

He smiled at her. "There's food in the refrigerator."

She frowned for an instant, then shook her head. "We gotta go."

"I'm ready," Jenson said. "Shall we take my car?"

"No. Somebody'll spot it. You drive my car."

Jenson put on a heavy raincoat and rain hat. "Just as you say. What is your name?"

"Tara. The car's out front. Keys are in it. Go south down the highway and turn off at Deadman Road."

"To the old tourist camping area? I thought the road was washed out."

"It ain't. Water's going over the bridge, but we can make it."

"The victim is in the old recreation building?"

"Yeah—how'd you know?" She eyed him suspiciously.

"Educated guess." He shrugged. "It's the only building down there that hasn't washed away."

She poked him with the gun. "Let's go."

They stepped out into the rain and plodded through mud to the car, where Jenson slipped into the driver's seat. She slid in beside him, munching on the mints. He started the engine, which ran rough.

"This car is in bad condition," he said.

"It's okay—we stole it from a used car lot."

MOMENTS LATER, THEY WERE DRIVING DOWN THE MAIN highway. The sounds of surf smashing against the beach rode on top of the steady roar of the rain filled wind. Jenson found the turnoff, then spent the next twenty minutes battling the steering wheel in order to keep the car on the road, which had turned into a minor stream filled with broken branches. He had been down the road many times in good weather and for pleasanter reasons and his memory of the twists and turns served him well. They reached the bridge which was awash with water from a stream that flowed into the ocean. Normally, the stream was a quiet, limpid brook. The rain had created a raging torrent.

They crossed the bridge and a few moments later were parked in front of a low, brown building. Jenson looked around for an instant. Nature was trying to destroy every vestige of civilization. Lumber, trees, cans, trash—all was dumped into the stream and carted out to the angry ocean several hundred yards away.

They got out of the car and stepped up on the narrow porch. She knocked three times. The door opened and a bulky, shaggy headed man in army fatigues peered out. His face was round, unshaven, and he was partially bald.

"You got him?"

"Yeah, Marchon."

"Enter." Marchon opened the door wide and stepped back.

They stepped inside. Outside of a log fire in the fireplace, the atmosphere was grim. A young, red-headed man was cleaning a rifle in front of the fire and a thin, middle-aged man was standing near the fire puffing on a pipe. Both wore ragged army clothes.

Tara pointed to the redhead. "Lieutenant Blake and the guy with the pipe is Corporal Lane." She nodded toward a heavy set black man in dungarees on the floor along the wall. "Private Duffy. He has a bullet in his leg."

The room was bare of furniture except for two small packing boxes that appeared to be serving as a makeshift desk. A tall, slender man

with shoulder-length dark hair and a thin, intense face was sitting on one of the boxes reading a newspaper. An automatic rifle lay across the other. His uniform was similar but much neater than those worn by the others. He ignored Jenson.

Jenson kneeled down and inspected the leg. The bullet had entered the fleshy part of the right leg just above the knee. "How about a cup of coffee before I start? Shot of whiskey in it."

"Hey—man—sounds great," grinned Duffy.

Jenson poured the thermos top full of coffee, added a shot of whiskey, then handed it to the black man. "This might hurt a little, Duffy."

Duffy nodded and Jenson, after removing his raincoat, went to work on the wound with all the efficiency and speed a good doctor acquires through years of practice. By the time Duffy had finished his coffee, the bullet was out and the wound dressed.

"Pretty good, doc," smiled Duffy.

Jenson nodded. "A minor wound. You should be up and around in a day or so." He poured some more coffee into the outstretched cup, then added more whiskey. He turned to Tara. "Now, I'd like to go home."

Tara looked troubled for an instant. She glanced toward the man in the center of the room. "Maybe you better talk to Major Costain."

"Major—Costain? Who is he?"

"He's our leader," she said proudly. "The Freedom Movement. We're gonna take over the country." She walked over to the boxes and saluted. "Sir, do you wish to talk to the prisoner?"

Costain looked up from his newspaper and glanced at Jenson. "I can give him a moment. Bring him in."

"Yes, sir." She turned. "Come on, doc."

Jenson walked over to the boxes. "Duffy will be fine in a few days."

"Good." He had high cheek bones, flashing eyes and a spare, dark face. He appeared to be in his forties. "Your name?"

"Jenson."

"And you are a doctor? I could use a doctor in my group."

"I fixed up your man," Jenson said. "Now, I'd like to go home."

"This building belongs to the Freedom Movement. You are a foreigner—perhaps a spy. You will remain here as my prisoner."

"You are crazy. I'm a doctor who was brought here at gun point."

"You will remain under arrest until we have finished our campaign in the area. Then—I will consider your case."

Jenson considered grabbing the automatic rifle but then discarded the idea. Too many guns behind him. "What could you possibly want

in this area?"'

Costain smiled and pulled out a stack of bills from his pocket. "Your local banks are investing in my movement."

Then, Jenson remembered—the front page newspaper item about the rash of bank holdups. "You're the bank robbers."

"Not merely bank robbers," Costain said smoothly. "We are the future of this country. We are in need of financing." He smiled. "Some day I will sit in the oval office in Washington and the citizens will be free."

"Like I am now?" Jenson asked.

"A temporary inconvenience," smiled Costain. "In the morning, my freedom fighters will strike again. You will remain here in custody. Private Duffy will guard you. Any attempt to escape will mean instant death. You may leave my office now." He turned back to his newspaper.

Tara touched his arm. "Let's go."

Jenson walked back to the fire. Costain was crazy—living in his own fantasy world! He eyed the serious faced Tara. "You seem like a smart girl. Do you really believe that nonsense? Six of you taking over the country?"

"We are seeds," she said. "We will grow into a huge forest." She was obviously parroting Costain's words.

Jenson sat down next to Duffy. "Seeds? Duffy, how come you are only a private in this man's army?"

Duffy smiled. "I'll make corporal one of these days. Makes no difference anyhow—we don't get no money."

"I'm a lieutenant," Tara said proudly. "When we take over, I'm gonna get a big government job."

Duffy held up the empty cup. "Any more?"

"How about some whiskey?" Jenson asked.

"Right on." As Jenson poured the whiskey, Duffy went on. "Tara, tell the doc about that lump."

She fingered the rifle for a few seconds nervously. Yeah, okay—doc, I got a hard lump on my breast. Costain says it's cancer."

"Quite possible," Jenson said. "May I examine it?"

She nodded and unbuttoned her coat. Her left breast came into view. "Go ahead."

Jenson made a quick examination. "Yes, there is a lump, a small one. It should be subjected to lab tests and it probably could be removed without much trouble—in a hospital."

"I ain't going to no hospital!" She buttoned up her coat. "Can't you do something here?" She suddenly looked frightened.

"No. I wouldn't dare." Pause. "If it's malignant, it should be removed before it spreads."

Blake and Marchon joined them.

Blake glared at her. "You got cancer and I slept with you last week!"

Jenson shook his head. "It isn't catching, Blake."

"Does that mean she's going to die?" Marchon asked.

"No, not necessarily," Jenson said. "If it is caught in time."

"Well," she said. "I ain't going to a hospital. And that's final."

"How about a shot of whiskey, doc?" asked Blake.

Jenson handed him the bottle. "Help yourself."

Costain rose suddenly. "We will settle down for the night now. Captain Marchon, you will set the watch. Private Duffy, you will remain here tomorrow to guard the prisoner."

"Yes, sir," said Marchon, who was about to take a drink of whiskey. He took a sip then looked at Blake. "Blake, you take the first four hours. Tara, the next shift—."

"Why?" exploded Blake. "Who in hell is gonna come down here in this weather?"

Costain walked toward him., "Blake, this is a military unit and you will act accordingly." His face was tense with anger. "You will take both shifts as punishment—and put that whiskey down."

"I—!" began Blake.

"Perhaps you would like a court martial!"

"No, sir," mumbled Blake.

JENSON, LISTENING TO THE CRISP DIALOGUE, REFLECTED that Costain, as crazy as he was, was definitely in charge of his little group. With the possible exception of Duffy, they were afraid of the man with the piercing eyes and long hair.

Costain took the bottle of whiskey away from Blake. "There will be no more drinking." He handed the bottle to Jenson. "You are in charge of the bottle." He paused. "Tomorrow's campaign will be difficult—the enemy are many and well armed. We have only the advantage of surprise."

The men listened with passive faces—expressionless—while Tara's young face wore a proud smile. Her sparkling eyes signalled complete devotion to Costain.

Costain continued, "Next week we will move into San Francisco for rest and recreation—and if we are to be an effective army, we will need volunteers—men and women with a sense of freedom—high moral values." He looked around at the group. "Good night." Then, he turned and went back to his boxes.

Blake, muttering to himself, threw a log on the fire, then picked up his gun. Tara touched his arm.

"I'll take that watch, Blake."

"Oh—shut up!" he snapped and walked off.

Marchon shrugged. "Too young—too impulsive. He will get us all killed." He walked off to a far corner and lay down on the floor. Lane, who rarely spoke, joined him.

Jenson and Tara sat down next to Duffy. Costain stretched out on the floor next to a box.

"Hey, Doc," whispered Duffy. "How about a nightcap?"

"Sure." Jenson poured some whiskey into the thermos top. "What's Costain's background?"

"He was a fine soldier in the American army," said Tara in a low voice. Her tones turned bitter. "They kicked him out."

"He was selling drugs on the side," added Duffy.

"What of it?" Tara's eyes blazed with sudden anger. "He was a good soldier, wasn't he?"

Jenson smiled. "Depends upon how you look at it, I guess." He took a sip out of the bottle. "Did the rest of them get kicked out of the army too?"

"Not exactly," drawled Duffy. "Blake is ex-navy. After his discharge, he couldn't get a job so he joined Costain to save the country. Lane—I dunno—he just appeared one day. Marchon comes from Canada. He's pretty good with guns so he must have been in some military outfit."

Jenson nodded. Then, he eyed Tara. "How about you?"

"You writing a book or something on us?" she asked.

"No—just curious."

She sighed. "My home's on Cape Cod—Provincetown. I remember the beaches—the white sand—the big storms in the winter. I used to sit out by the lighthouse and watch the waves come in—I love the ocean—so big—strong . . ." She looked at Jenson suddenly. "My folks died when I was fifteen and I was sent to Iowa—horrible place—no water except what came outta the tap. My uncle tried to rape me at least once a week—so I ran away to San Francisco. Bummed around there for a couple of years and finally latched on to Costain. When we take over the country, the first guy I'm gonna have shot is my uncle in Iowa." She stared at Jenson for a few seconds, then lowered her gaze. "I'm going to sleep." She lay down on the floor and curled up like a baby.

Jenson and Duffy exchanged glances.

Jenson thought for a moment. "Duffy, I have a deck of cards in my

bag. How about a few games of gin rummy?"

"You're on."

They played cards until finally, both fell asleep.

THEY BOTH AWAKENED SOMETIME AFTER SIX IN THE morning and found themselves alone. The rain had settled down to a steady drizzle and the sky was black.

Duffy sat up and stretched. He grinned and patted the forty-five strapped to his waist. "Am I gonna have to guard you, doc?"

Jenson laughed. "No, I won't try to get away. Actually, I'm kind of curious about how this scene is going to end up."

"With us dead maybe," Duffy said with a sigh. He stood up and flexed his leg. "Not bad." Then he limped over to the boxes, felt around one of them and finally pulled out a box of soda crackers. "I figured Costain had something to eat under here. Let's have breakfast."

"A shot of whiskey and crackers," mused Jenson. "I haven't had that since med school." He rose. "Mind if I look outside?"

Duffy shrugged.

Jenson went out on the porch. The angry ocean was tossing huge rollers at the small beach and surrounding rocky shore while the rain-fed stream, seemingly anxious to deposit its debris, dumped it into the oncoming waves. Jenson stood on the porch for several minutes, fascinated by the storm's handiwork. Duffy, munching a cracker, joined him.

"Man," breathed Duffy. "What a sight."

"Nature at its worst—or possibly best," said Jenson. He turned and went inside.

After throwing a couple of logs on the fire, he poured some whiskey and they sat down for breakfast. After a few minutes of silence, Jenson spoke.

"Duffy, you seem to be a clear thinking guy. Do you really go for Costain's line? He's psycho and the rest of them are living in a dream world."

"Yeah, I know," drawled Duffy. "I'm glad I didn't go with them today. I usually drive." He grinned. "I was in the army too, doc. Did okay. Spent a year driving a truck in Vietnam. Best job I ever had."

"Why didn't you stay in the army?"

Duffy frowned. "Some dude promised me a job back in New York driving a truck. I got back there, he wasn't around and neither was a job." He shrugged.

"I see. So you joined Costain."

"I was drafted," grinned Duffy. "I was in a bank one day putting some money in for my brother when Costain, Marchon and Lane came busting in with guns. They took me as a hostage, made me drive." He shrugged. "So, I stayed with them. What the Hell." He munched a cracker. "Sure, they're a lotta crap—."

"Dangerous crap," Jenson said. "They kill people—innocent people."

"I never did," Duffy said. "I told them I wouldn't shoot anybody."

"I don't think you would. What's your first name?"

Duffy smiled. "Real Irish name—Pat."

"How about that." Jenson picked up the cards. "Let's play some more. Nothing else to do."

"Okay, if you wanna get beat, doc."

They settled down to cards.

AT NOON, THEY HAD MORE CRACKERS FOR LUNCH AND then fell asleep on the floor. They woke up around four and were about to get back to cards when the door burst open.

Costain staggered in. His face was drawn and his uniform was covered with blood. "Tara out in the car," he gasped, and sat down on one of the boxes.

Jenson hurried out to the car and found the girl slumped over the steering wheel. She was bloody. He pulled open her shirt and saw that a bullet had entered her left breast. Another had entered her stomach. Her pulse was weak and unsteady. He carried her inside and put her on the floor.

"Costain, I have to get her to a hospital!" He looked toward the boxes.

Duffy was standing over the prone Costain., "He's dead, doc. He must have taken six bullets."

"No," whispered Tara. "No hospital, doc, the cancer's gone, ain't it?"

"Probably," Jenson said. "But, you'll die if you—."

She shook her head. "No hospital, no morgue. I don't want a bunch of strangers pawing my body. Don't let them, doc! Damn Blake! We were doing great in the bank when he took a shot at some little kid. The mother went nuts and jumped him. The guard got his gun off the floor and killed Lane and Marchon. Blake was wrestling with the mother for the gun. It went off and got him in the head. Costain and I ran out the back way and two cops were waiting for us. We got away from them in the rain but ran into a roadblock. We went through. Some cop had a machine gun . . ." She closed her eyes. "Remember, doc, no police

morgue . . .”

“Tara! I can fix—!”

Too late. She was dead.

Duffy pulled the holster from his waist and dropped it to the floor.
“So much for the Freedom Movement. War’s over, doc.”

“Yes, it is, isn’t it?”

Her face was placid, like that of a child asleep.

“Duffy—Pat—How about opening the front door for me?”

“Sure.”

Jenson picked her up. She was so light. He walked out into the rain and sloshed through the mud to the stream. “The morgue won’t get you, lieutenant.” He dropped her into the water.

He and Duffy watched the body disappear into the ocean.

He turned to Duffy. “Tell you what. You drop out of sight for a few weeks, then come see me in Wellsford. I’ll line up a job for you. I wouldn’t touch Costain’s money—too risky.”

“Right on, doc,” grinned Duffy. “And hey, man—what you did for Tara was great.”

They shook hands. Then, Jenson got his bag, handed the whiskey to Duffy and headed for home on foot.

FAMOUS LAST WORDS

Who said these famous last words?

1. “Nevermore!”
2. “We belong dead!”
3. “Rosebud.”
4. “Is this the end of Rico?”

ANSWERS

1. The raven in Poe’s poem, *The Raven*.
2. The monster in *The Bride of Frankenstein*.
3. Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane*.
4. Edward G. Robinson in *Little Caesar*.

Mike's Mail

SHORTER AND SHORTER?

Don't know who to address this to, but I'm getting more and more disgusted because the Mike Shayne stories are getting shorter and shorter.

I've bought the magazine for umpteen years and just renewed my subscription for \$32.00 for 2 years. The stories by Brett Halliday were longer when I started, even before it was sold.

This month only page 4 to page 20, last month page 4 to 33, January 4 to 40.

I only bought it in the first place for Mike Shayne stories. Buy all paperback books of Brett Halliday's second hand I can find.

Am a 77-year-old senior and enjoy mystery, spy and detective stories. How about longer Mike Shayne stories, so I don't have to cancel.

Mrs. Beulah Wyoda
855 W. Aldine, Apt 1208
Chicago, IL 60657

It's true the Shayne stories are coming in different lengths. This is partly to enable us to publish more novelets and short stories by other authors. With one huge story up front, there isn't a heck of a lot of space left for other things. It's also to give Brett Halliday a breather. For over twenty-five years, Mike Shayne stories have been appearing in every issue of the magazine. If you think it's easy to keep up that pace, try it sometime. Anyway, the proper length for a story is the number of words it takes to tell it. Turning out an adventure month after month is not just a typing chore; it takes thought and planning and a lot of wear and tear on the brain. Rather than conform rigidly to a set number of words, we're letting Brett tell it in whatever length he feels will do the job.

Meanwhile, last month's lead story was almost forty pages—a good chunk out of a 132-page magazine—and this one is even longer. Hope you like it!

WORST STORIES?

I am enclosing the front cover from the March issue of the Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine for which I paid \$1.75 plus tax. I have purchased this magazine for years and must say that this issue has the worst stories I have ever read.

Jack D. Lane
F-8 Castaway Apts.
Warner Robins, GA 31093

Unless Georgia has other rules, normally a purchaser doesn't pay tax on periodicals. Few people like all the stories in any issue of anything, but I'm surprised (and disappointed) you couldn't find anything in thirteen stories to please you. Maybe next time!

MORE BY MOORE

I am a shut-in and read a great deal. I enjoy your magazine each month.

I do not always agree with John Ball, but I like his column. But I especially enjoy those hilarious stories by Arthur Moore and wish you would print more of them. They are so unusual. Thank you.

Jessica Overton
Van Nuys, CA 91489

You're welcome!

BRING BACK THE OLD SHAYNE!

I'm about to renew my subscription to the best mystery magazine on the market: MSMM! But even the best can be improved upon. Bring back the old Mike Shayne. Tone down the Martial Arts stuff. There's nothing wrong with them—I study one myself—but Shayne isn't The Destroyer—he doesn't need to be. He has to survive in the 80's, but he doesn't have to be altered completely. He can take care of himself; he has since 1939.

Also, is there any chance of acquiring a copy of the 1972 Mike

Shayne annual? I would love to have a copy. I collect Mike Shayne novels and this would be something special to add to my collection.

Well, best of luck to all at MSMM.

Eric H. Caruso
5 High Street
Bridgewater, MA 02324

Mike frequently battles his opponents on their own level. If the bad guys are expert in karate or kung fu, it would be ridiculous not to know something about these martial arts to combat them. Rest assured, however, that in most of his adventures he'll stick to a good old right to the jaw.

As for the 1972 Mike Shayne annual, I'm afraid all of them are long gone, but you might find one in a used magazine store!

A VOTE FOR WEIRD AND OFFBEAT

I was somewhat disturbed to read the recent letter you printed by Rev. Hinshaw, a fellow Wisconsinite. Personally, I purchase your magazine each month at the local bookstore (not EQMM or AHMM) because of the unusual and offbeat fiction certain to be found within. If these stories are truly disturbing to Rev. Hinshaw or a few others, may I suggest they simply skip these tales (one can usually ascertain the content of an individual story by the brief introduction provided above the story). I strongly suggest the detractors of these "weird" or supernatural stories not get too greedy or selfish—the vast majority of material printed in MSMM is the "basic mysteries" as Rev. Hinshaw phrased it; let those of us who enjoy a change of pace every once in awhile have our two or three stories that differ from the norm each month.

MSMM, keep up the good work! In fact, here's hoping you print more of the weird and offbeat in the future!

Mike O'Brien
1210 Primrose Lane
Oshkosh, WI 54956

Stiff Competition

BOOK REVIEWS by JOHN BALL

Timothy Williams in his first novel, *The Red Citroen*, introduces us to an Italian policeman, Commissario Trottì. He is middle aged, plodding, persistent, and most of all incorruptible. The chief attraction of this work is the detailed and obviously knowledgeable use of the background of present day Italy. There are even frequent footnotes to explain terms used to non-Italian readers. The story itself is rather slow moving and the plot does not break any new ground. However, the reader will find himself seeing, hearing, smelling and experiencing Italy, both the good and the bad, to the point where Trottì's patient honesty becomes remarkable in its setting. (St. Martin's, \$11.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Red Diamond, the unique and delightful private eye is back in Mark Schorr's new book *Ace of Diamonds*. In case you missed the first volume *Red Diamond, Private Eye*, our hero is Simon Jaffe, a middle-aged New York cabbie who lives for his collection of pulp magazines. When his wife throws them all away, he withdraws from reality into the belief that he is really Red Diamond, king of the pulps. Whereupon he sets out to live the life of a 1940 two-fisted, slam bang slamus, friend of Sam Spade, Phil Marlowe, Lew Archer and all the rest. This time he turns up in Las Vegas, convinced that he is indeed Red Diamond, the toughest of the tough. Yes, he gets a case and from there on you won't want to miss a word. Private eye literature will never be the same. Red, we love 'ya. (St. Martin's, \$13.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

The prolific Bill Knox is back under his Michael Kirk by-line with his marine salvage investigator, Andrew Laird, in *Mayday From Malaga*. This time an ancient freighter goes aground near the coast of Spain. When the original insurance investigator is killed, Laird takes over. Knox writes quickly, as witness this double sentence: "His shirt had been soaked in the brief dash from the car and the hop stock included a cheap line in waterproof jackets." But despite a few such lapses, this is a fast-moving story with some good action and a developing plot that holds interest. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$11.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

For some time it was a common complaint that mystery literature was not receiving the same scholarly attention as science fiction. This is now rapidly being corrected. The latest addition to the literature is actually two volumes, both by William H. Lyles, devoted to the Dell paperbacks, now a prime source of collector interest. The first book is called *Putting Dell on the Map*. It is a detailed history, with illustrations of the famous Dell lines. This is a thorough piece of excellent scholarship, complete with index. It is a very attractive hardcover book that is sure to win wide praise from collectors everywhere. It is offered by the Greenwood Press, 88 Post Road, Westport CT 06881. The price, \$27.50, is reasonable for a specialized work of this kind.

The second volume is *Dell Paperbacks, 1942 to Mid 1962*. This nearly 500-page volume represents an awesome amount of research and preparation. It lists and catalogs all the Dell publications, with variants, print orders, and other data. There are several indices, including one for the cover artists, another by subject, and so on. There is no question this is a definitive work as well as an enormous blessing to the Dell collector (of which there are many). (The Greenwood Press, \$60.00)

☆ ☆ ☆

Paula Gosling's new book, *The Woman in Red*, is less a mystery than a straight thriller. It is laid in Spain where an innocent man is being held on a murder charge. A British consular official sets out to clear up the matter. Mrs. Gosling writes well, but we wish she would introduce her people more fully than she does; some of them slip in sidewise and are hard to identify. Good use of the Spanish background is the main feature here. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$11.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Professor Gideon Oliver, the richly enjoyable anthropologist is back for an encore, and a remarkably good one it is. The author is Aaron J. Elkins, himself an anthropologist who uses his professional knowledge to produce another superior book. This one, called *The Dark Place*, is laid in the Olympic National Park. As the book progresses, our scientist encounters a capable lady ranger who has a lot more than bones to offer. When a lost tribe of ancient Indians begins to appear on the scene, Dr. Elkins seems to paint himself into a literary corner and his story begins to sound like H. Rider Haggard's *She* or Sax Rohmer's *She Who Sleeps*. But hang on: he has a highly ingenious and completely fair solution lurking in the final pages. This is one you won't want to miss. (Walker and Co., \$12.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Elizabeth C. Ward has told an atmospheric, soft focus story built around the California coastline in *Coast Highway 1*. She has a definite gift for rich atmosphere, but she also introduces some unrealities. A college professor takes off in mid-term without explanation to work on a murder case while a local policeman from a coastal town keeps turning up in other jurisdictions all over the state. There are some other plot lapses, but the good news is that the author reveals a viable talent. We hope she writes for us again. (Walker and Co., \$12.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

PAPERBACK NOTES: The engaging Reverend Randolph, former pro quarterback and now pastor of a high society church, detects again in *Reverend Randolph and the Unholy Bible*. Avon offers it in paperback at \$2.95 . . . Lovers of Sherlocks Holmes won't want to miss Julian Symons' *A Three Pipe Problem*, now available from Penguin at \$2.95 . . . A true crime report that is mislabeled fiction is *The Cop Who Wouldn't Quit* by Rick Nelson. The title tells it all. This Bantam original will help restore your faith in humanity. \$3.95 . . . Whitley Strieber, a specialist in the occult, explores the outer possibilities of the mind in an espionage novel of terror, *Black Magic*. It is now available in paperback from Pocket Books at \$3.50 . . . If it's blood and terror you want, a goodly quantity is supplied by Martha Moffett (how did a nice girl, etc.) and Sy Cook in *The Sharing*, an Avon original that would be warmly endorsed by Count Dracula. \$2.95.

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2 years	\$32.00	<input type="checkbox"/>	\$38.00	<input type="checkbox"/>	\$40.00	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please check correct box

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____

STATE _____ **ZIP** _____

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NOW
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\$ 59.95
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